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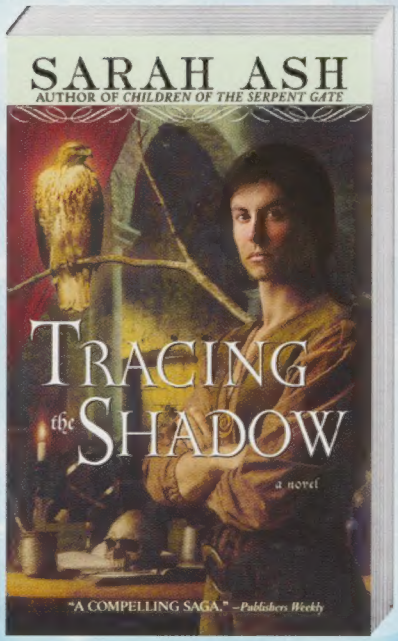

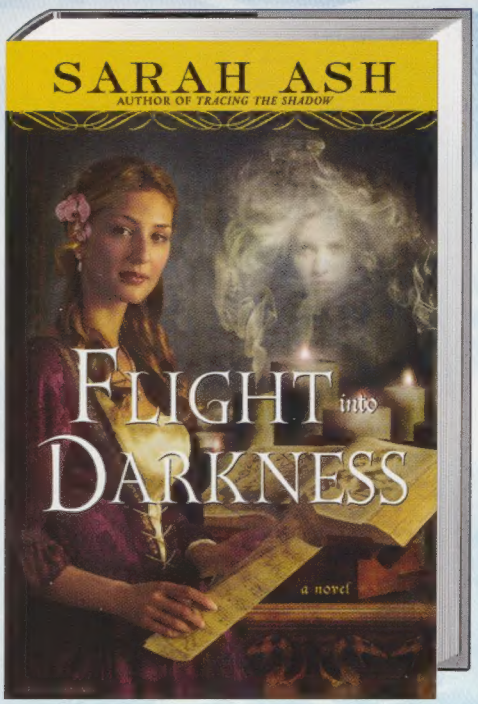

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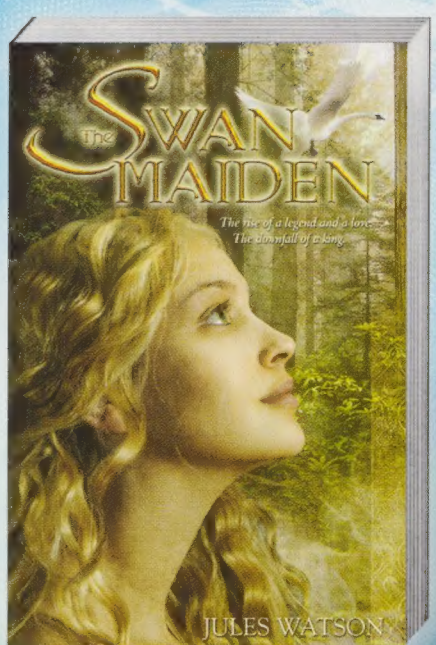

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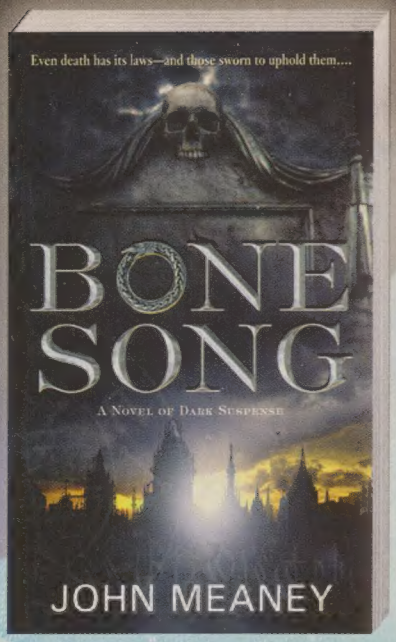

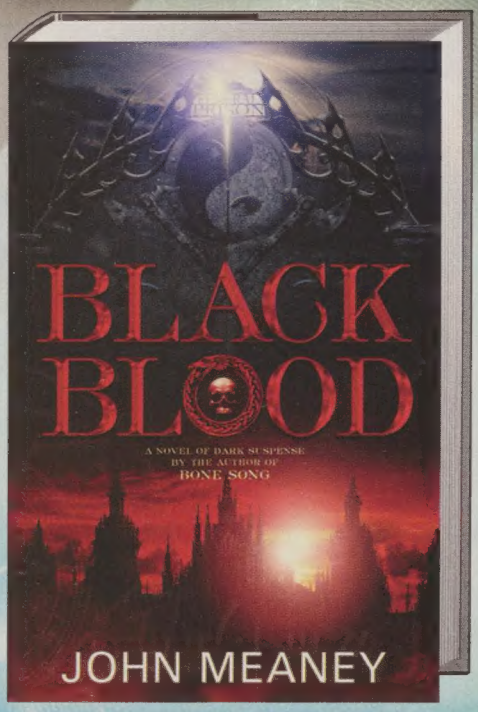

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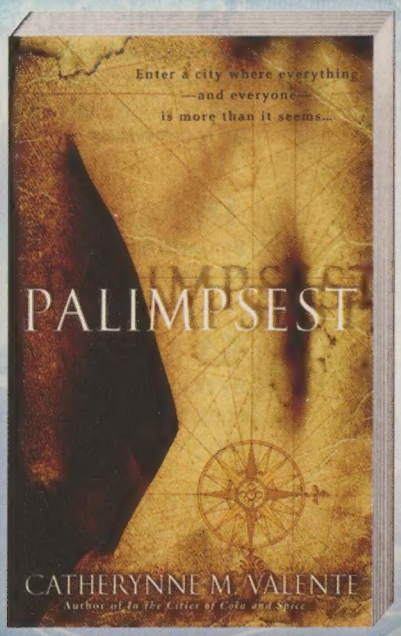
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April 2009

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ABOVE: French artist Bruno Mallart brings his unique vision to illustrations for *Alice in Wonderland*. Turn to page 62 to see more of his fantastic work. COVER: Malin Ackerman stars as Silk Spectre II in Warner Bros.' *Watchmen*. Photo courtesy of Warner Bros. Photo by Clay Enos.TM & © DC Comics.

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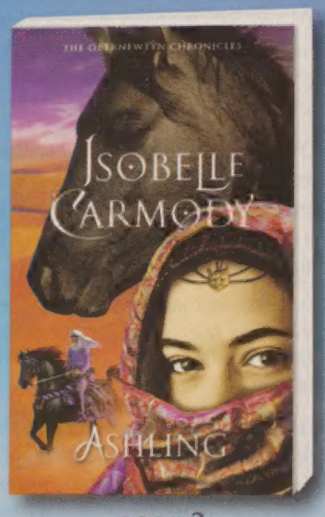

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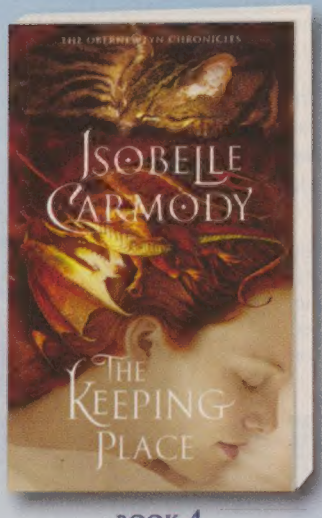

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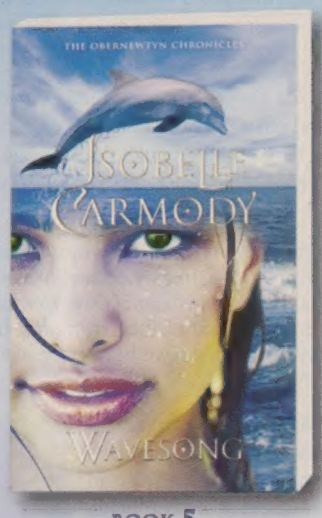

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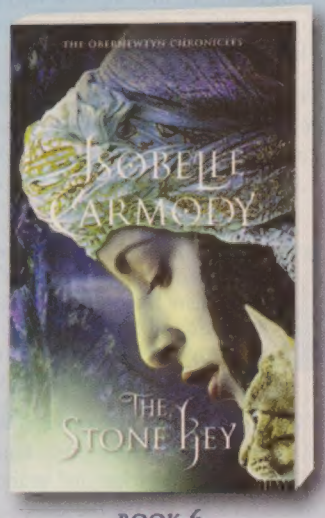

BOOK 6

Illustration © 2008 by Cathy Larsen and Les Petersen, Getty Images

Set in a postapocalyptic world, the Obernewtyn Chronicles tell the story of independent and spirited Elspeth Gordie as she acknowledges and develops the telepathic powers that make her a Misfit. Conflicts between rebels and the totalitarian Council endure as Elspeth and other Misfits struggle to build alliances, protect the persecuted, and uncover the Beforetime secrets to prevent further world destruction.

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—Tamora Pierce, *New York Times* bestselling author, on *Obernewtyn*

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Contributors

Gregory

JAMES RYAN GREGORY is a second-year Ph.D. student in English at the University of Georgia-Athens, where, in addition to finishing up his own coursework, he is currently teaching a section of freshman composition focused on medieval heroic literature. He received his M.A. in Medieval Studies from the Medieval Institute at Western Michigan University in 2006, and his B.A. in English from Central Michigan University in 2002. His research interests include the literature and language of both medieval and modern-day Wales, as well as that of England and Scandinavia, and he spent the summers of 2004 and 2005 studying modern Welsh at the University of Wales-Lampeter. In 2005 he also performed research at the British Library for his master's thesis on the *Book of Margery Kempe* and the *Orcherd of Syon*. He hopes to return to the United Kingdom to further his work on early Welsh literature later this year.

DESIRINA BOSKOVICH graduated from Emory University in 2005, with a degree in creative writing. In 2007, she attended the Clarion Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers' Workshop. Her work is forthcoming in *Last Drink Bird Head* and *The Leonardo Variations*, edited by Jeff and Ann VanderMeer. Currently, she lives in Atlanta, where she works as a freelance copywriter. Her favorite stories come from daydreams, nightmares, and the South.

Staggs

MATT STAGGS is a writer and literary publicist specializing in speculative literature. When not reviewing books for *Realms of Fantasy*, you can find him at www.entertheoctopus.wordpress.com, where he blogs about literature, New Media, and popular culture.

K.D. WENTWORTH has sold more than seventy pieces of short fiction to such markets as *FASF, Hitchcock's, Realms of Fantasy, Weird Tales, Sword and Sorceress 23*, and *Return to the Twilight Zone*. Three of her stories have been Finalists for the Nebula Award for Short Fiction. Currently, she has seven novels in print, the most recent being *The Course of Empire*, written with Eric Flint and published by Baen. She lives in Tulsa with her husband and a combined total of one hundred sixty pounds of dog (Akita + Siberian Hussy) and is working on several new novels with Flint. Learn more about her at www.kdwentworth.com.

ADAM CORBIN FUSCO's short fiction has appeared in *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, Weird Tales, Science Fiction Age, The Best of Cemetery Dance*, and other publications. For ten years he was an associate with a casting agency in Baltimore, where he worked on such films as *Serial Mom, Avalon, Cry-Baby, Pecker, He Said, She Said*, and the television series *Homicide: Life on the Street*. He lives in Maryland.

Carty & Carty

ERIN AND KELLY CARTY are twin sisters who live in Toronto, Canada. They have been illustrating together since graduating from Sheridan College in 2001. Their client list includes LImited and Lamar Snowboards, *New York* magazine, *Scholastic*, and many others. After the launch of their own artist-designed vinyl toy "Twink" (www.twinkktoy.com), they have been busy working on paintings for their own gallery show.

Pierandrei

GARTH UPSHAW lives in Portland, Oregon, with his brilliant, gorgeous wife, Katrina, and his three super-genius children: Chris, Kami, and Luken. He's had jobs ranging from foundry drudge, bell packer, and tarantula minder to .com CEO, and has recently embarked on a guinea pig breeding project. Garth is an avid biker, refusing to remove his feet from the pedals even in the icy rain that mars the Mediterranean climate of the Pacific Northwest only six to nine months a year. This is his first sale to *Realms of Fantasy*.

NATALIA PIERANDREI, better known as "nati," is a traditional illustrator based in Italy where she has lived for most of her life. From her earliest memories, Nati has always had a passion for art. The idea of taking a blank piece of paper and knowing that anything is possible has made her work a collage of styles and influences: Art Nouveau, European graphic novels, gothic and classical fantasy themes, and a strong influence from Japanese anime and manga. In fact during her college years she spent almost two years in Tokyo and that's the reason she loves anything related to Japan and its culture. Nati's art has appeared in various art books, the most notable being *The Art of Faery* and *The World of Faery* by Paper Tiger. Her most recent project is *Precious Things*, a book completely dedicated to her artwork that has been released in France by Le Calepin Jaune Editions. Visit Nati's website at www.nati-art.com.

Devon & Huggins

"We are **KURT HUGGINS** and **ZELDA DEVON**. We live in a pocket-sized apartment in Brooklyn where we collect neat, weird things. Our home is abundant with books, old furniture, mismatching tea cups, and a cat named Cipher. We both illustrate stuff for money so we can continue to invent stories, buy shoelaces, watch puppet shows, and eat sandwiches."

REALMS OF FANTASY

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By Resa Nelson

Although it takes place in 1985, *Watchmen* shines a light on our time.

IF YOU'VE READ ALAN MOORE'S GRAPHIC NOVEL, WATCHMEN, REST ASSURED that the movie (due in theaters on March 6 from Warner Bros. Pictures) will do it justice. If you're a stranger to Moore's world, know this: Watchmen is unlike any superhero movie ever made before.

"Judging by the book sales, a lot of people are coming to it for the first time, which I think is fantastic," says producer Debbie Snyder. Her husband, Zack Snyder, directed *Watchmen*. "Because we don't want the movie to substitute the book experience. We want to complement it. It's just a different medium."

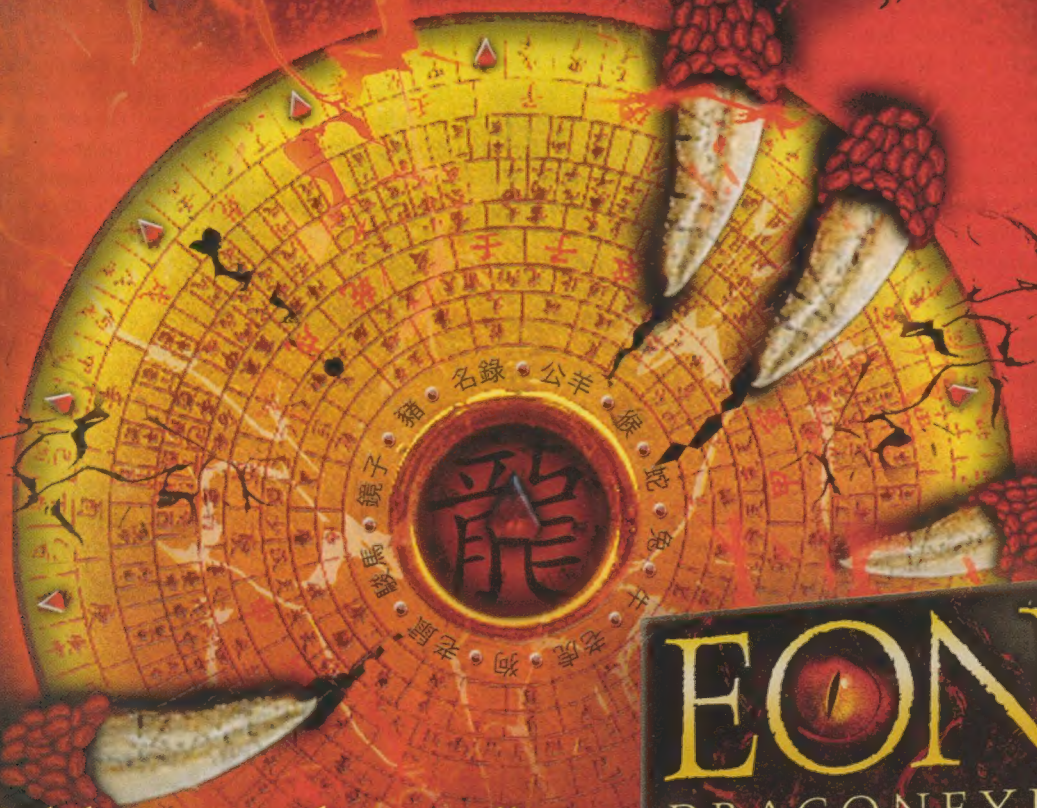
Since its publication in 1986 and 1987, *Watchmen* has been a hot property in Hollywood. Over the course of nearly 20 years, it bounced from studio to studio, but potential deals kept falling through. When Zack Snyder took on the task of directing *300*—the movie based on Frank Miller's graphic novel—everything changed. Zack's approach was to honor Miller's story and style to the extent of duplicating many panels from the graphic novel on screen. Suddenly, Zack became the most logical choice to helm *Watchmen*. He also saved it from what could have been an unthinkable fate.

"It had gone around to practically all the studios and ended up back at Warner," Debbie says. "And they had come to us and said, 'Hey, are you guys interested in being a part of this? Is Zack interested in directing it?' I remember when we got the call, having the discussion with Zack. It was really daunting because it was a property that he felt was like the Holy Grail. Knowing a little bit of its history and how complex it was, he said no. Then as he started thinking about it, he felt like he, in a way, had the responsibility that he could do it and do it justice. It had gone away from the source material, and little by little we brought it back."

Watchmen takes place in an alternate history where comic books have inspired everyday people to become "costumed adventurers" who assume secret identities and fight crime during an era when vigilantism is legal and encouraged. In other words, these costumed adven-

Fans of Alan Moore's Watchmen *are eagerly awaiting the release of the Warner Bros. film on March 6. Director Zack Snyder has remained faithful to the original graphic novel. All photos courtesy of Warner Bros.*

THE FIRST GREAT EPIC FANTASY OF THE YEAR



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—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

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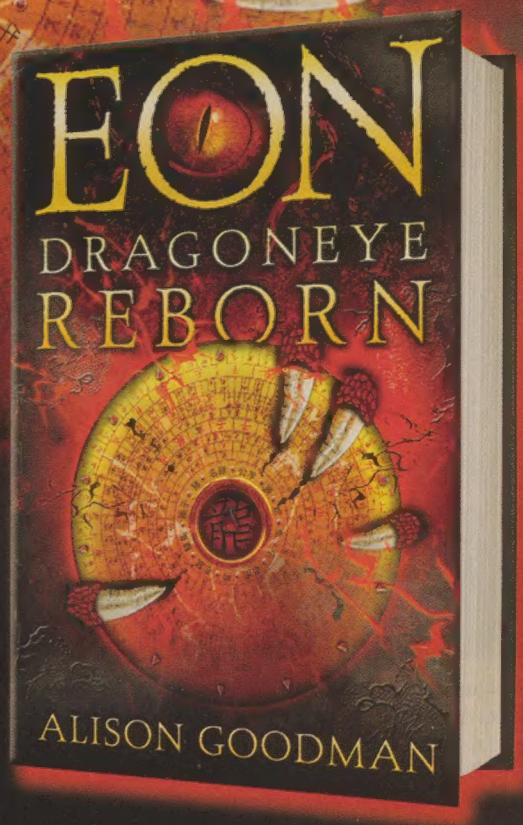
"I *loved* it.
Can't *wait* for the sequel."
—Tamora Pierce, author of the Alanna books



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turers have no superhuman powers. The first group (known as the Minutemen) was popular in the late 1930s but disbanded in 1949. The next group (the Crimebusters) ushered in the dawn of a new day in the 1960s. Nearly all of the Crimebusters are typical costumed adventurers. Rorschach (played by Jackie Earle Haley of *Little Children*) wears a mask that morphs into different patterns. Ozymandias (Matthew Goode of *Match Point*) is intelligent, strong, and acrobatic. But Dr. Manhattan (Billy Crudup of *Almost Famous*) is something entirely different: he's a scientist whose human body was destroyed in a nuclear accident and reformed as a manlike creature with blue skin. Dr. Manhattan is the only Crimebuster who has true superpowers. He can teleport himself and others anywhere. He can change his own height. He can control the atomic structure of anything, and he knows the future and everything that happens in it although he's helpless to change any events. The popular media speak about Dr. Manhattan is, "The superman exists and he's American."

Because Dr. Manhattan has godlike powers, the U.S. government uses him to win the Vietnam War. Nixon remains in office. But in 1977, the police riot, claiming that costumed adventurers make their jobs impossible. As a result, the Keene Act is passed, which once again makes vigilantism illegal.

Watchmen takes place in 1985, when Nixon is still in office, Russia has invaded Afghanistan, and the world is on the brink of World War III. One of the original Minutemen speculates that without the formation of the Minutemen, costumed heroes would have been a short-lived fad and the United States wouldn't be in the mess it's in today.

But the story that drives *Watchmen* is the hunt for a serial killer who is targeting costumed adventurers. One by one, they're being attacked and murdered. Rorschach—who is now considered crazy and wanted for murdering known criminals (he likes to deposit their bodies on the steps of police stations)—is determined to find out the identity of the "mask killer" and stop him.

When the *Watchmen* script was handed over to Zack and Debbie Snyder, they discovered the story had been updated so that it took place today instead of in 1985. "It was originally going to be a modern telling," Debbie says about the script they received. "It was going to be about the war on terror. And Zack said, 'I feel like it needs to be back to 1985.'

"Nothing else worked. It didn't fit. You look at the origin of how the masked avengers came about. What did they do at the time? When the Keene Act banned them, what did that do? It is such a great character piece at its heart. The best that society has to offer still have problems and they're dysfunctional. Each one of them has such an interesting character arc, and they're real people.

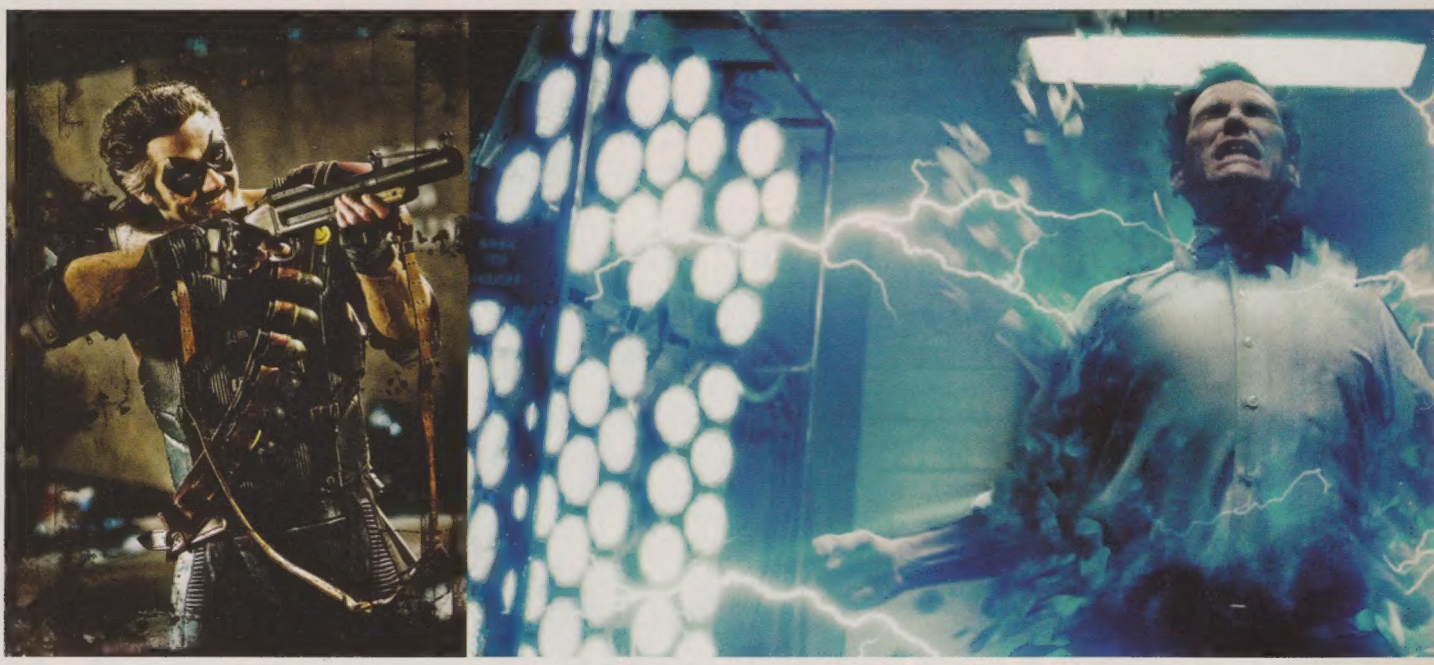
"We felt as filmmakers, if you do something modern, it's how we feel about what's going on. And if it's set back in 1985, it's more of a metaphor. We wanted people—like when they had the experience of reading the graphic novel—to say, 'Wow. This is like what's going on today.' We wanted it to be about that, not about what Zack thinks about it. We want people to think and ask the questions. I think that's the fun of *Watchmen*."

"They called me while I was still in post on *300*," Zack says about the invitation to direct *Watchmen*. "What it did was to give me the opportunity to put the screws to the studio and let me make the movie more like the graphic novel. True *Watchmen* fans, regardless of what they think of *300*, owe a debt to that movie. Because there's a lot they wouldn't have gotten. If I weren't making the movie, who knows what it would be. It could have been better, of course, but there's a really good chance it would have been the war on terror. There was no reason for them to change all that stuff back to the way it is in the graphic novel, except for the fact that *300* made all that money, and that's what I wanted to do. So I was able to put pressure on them to let me do it that way."

While *300* was being made, the filmmakers had faith that it would be something special, but they never anticipated its blockbuster success. They had taken clips of *300* to Comic-Con before the movie's release, and the fans' excitement sparked a catalyst that later made *300* an overnight hit. "What a surprise for everybody," Debbie says. "Nobody wanted to make *300*. The studio really wanted to work with Zack but wasn't sure what it was. We kept saying, 'It's going to be a reimagining of the sword and sandals genre. I don't think they got what it was, but they knew it was something. No one expected it—including us—to be what it was. It became this phenomenon. It was crazy. It's wild to look at the fact that there are so many spoofs on YouTube. It's a good indicator of how it hit pop culture. To us, it's unbelievable."

"It's pretty cool," Zack says. "It's a pretty boutique-y movie in a lot of ways. It doesn't fit the box of mainstream formulaic blockbuster. That part makes it fun. This hard R, sword and sandals, weird comic book movie—it's cool to see this crack the knees of pop culture."

But directing and producing *Watchmen* was a horse of a different color. *Watchmen* is a bigger and more complex story than *300*. *Watchmen* came with a larger budget and needed a variety of sets. When shooting *300*, Zack used one large desert set surrounded by high bluescreen walls. To change location, all he had to do was change the camera angle. A few scenes were shot elsewhere, but the bluescreen set was *300*'s home base. By comparison, *Watchmen* takes place in New York, Antarctica, and on Mars.



"It's a lot more hard sets," Zack says about making *Watchmen*. "On Mars or Antarctica, we used a lot of bluescreen, but mostly it was real sets. I was very excited about doing it with the real sets and just having that tactile experience. I think it goes into the same sort of philosophy that we used on *300*, which was if the character physically touches the wall or set, then you need to build it. For that reason, we felt that building the sets was the right way to do it. I think the greatest challenge is just the scope of it. Just how ambitious the movie is. How big it is. And that part's been interesting and difficult, but also fun."

"We had a long shoot," Debbie says. "It was a 101-day shoot. We only had 60 days on *300*. There's a lot of sets. The difference for us was we built a lot more. We built a big New York City back lot in Vancouver. It was very challenging just to get the thing done."

Another challenge was figuring out how to handle the "supplementary" material at the end of each chapter in the graphic novel. The first few chapters of *Watchmen* are augmented with "chapters" from *Under The Hood*, the autobiography of Hollis Mason (aka Nite Owl, played by Stephen McHattie of *300*), one of the original Minutemen. Another chapter is followed by an article entitled "Dr. Manhattan: Super-Powers and the Superpowers," written by the fictional Professor Milton Glass. Yet another chapter is followed by a police report and reports from a psychiatric hospital about Rorschach. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. All of this extra material reveals important information about the story and the characters, often in subtle ways. "I think the comic does allow for a lot more back story and interesting asides that would be literally impossible in a movie, but I really made an effort to try and get as much as I could out of each of them," Zack says.

"I went through all of it, and I truly tried to find those little gems from the supplemental material and cue on them into the movie in a cool way. I think that fans will get to see things in the movie that they never saw in the graphic comic. In the title sequence, for instance, I do a shot of Dollar Bill with his cape caught in the revolving door at the bank, gunned down. Because the movie also points a finger at the superhero genre and makes you reevaluate the 'why' of being a superhero, that image to me was always really striking. It's almost what they do with *The Incredibles*. It's clear that the whole concept of 'no capes' has been linked back to that part in *Watchmen* where Dollar Bill gets his cape caught in the revolving door. I felt like, iconographically, it was one of those moments that I thought goes into the face of superhero-dom, to see this superhero with his cape caught and he's dead and he's being photographed by these police crime scene photographers. It's one of those moments that's very unheroic."

Even though many of these extra details have been incorporated, *Watchmen* is a hefty and complex graphic novel, which required making a few changes to the source material. "I don't think we had to cut that much out," Zack says. "The story is pretty easy. What I tended to do, to make it more interesting in the marketplace, in the world's popular culture—frankly because I think it's more interesting—was to try to stick with as much character as we could. In a lot of ways, it's a character movie more than a story-driven action.

"It's 2 hours and 40 minutes, compared to *300*, which was an hour and 58 minutes. The work with *Watchmen* was trying to condense down the big moments. When I read the book, there were certain moments that rang for me as being quintessentially *Watchmen*. And that's really what we tried to focus on. Just the things that make Watchmen Watchmen. And that are different. And also to make the movie hopefully more unique and interesting. It is like a deconstructionist journey into comics, so that certainly is what we tried to do."

Although *Watchmen* was written in the 1980s, part of its appeal is its reflection of current times. "It's the right time with what's going on in the world today," Debbie says. "It's so politically relevant. When the comic came out, there were all these superhero comics and people were tired of that. They thought this was going to be another one. They picked it up, and it blew everybody's mind. It's something completely different. We're now in the same place with films. I think the fact that my mother knows a lot about the origin stories of Superman and Batman—it's not just fan boys anymore. It's really interesting to me to take that genre of the superheroes—if they did exist amongst us,

they wouldn't be rescuing cats out of trees or getting bank robbers. What would you really do with them if your government had one on its side? You'd send them to win a war. What does it do to the government and its power? What does it say about religion if there is a superbeing living amongst us? There are so many more interesting questions that none of the other superhero movies have touched upon."

"I just did an interview on whether I think that Barack Obama's presidency affects the sort of politics of *Watchmen*," Zack says. "Maybe this era of optimism—even though I would say it's an era of optimism that's shrouded in a dark need—whether or not it nullifies or takes away from the fact that we now have Barack Obama: does that make it a different movie? And I said, there are tons of things in *Watchmen* that are relevant to current politics, not to mention the fact that in some ways *Watchmen* is a bracket at the end of the Bush administration and before we go into the double digits of the 2000s. To say where we are. It is a marker. I think the movie marks the time exactly, even though it takes place in 1985. It really shines a light on our time, right now, in a really interesting way."

That may be the case right now, but by the time *Watchmen* is released, Zack and Debbie Snyder will have worked on it for nearly three years. What was it like to watch the real world change during the creation of the film version of *Watchmen*? "It's been cool," Zack says, "because I think in a lot of ways the world has come around to become even more relevant to the *Watchmen* world in the last year or so. In my efforts to make the movie more like the graphic novel—setting it back in 1985, making Nixon president again, and all that stuff—I feel in some ways that's paid dividends. Because it's made the metaphors of politics more effective than trying to make an actual statement about the war in Iraq or Afghanistan or whatever the hell you're doing."

In a way, Zack and Debbie Snyder went back to their roots this summer. They took clips of *Watchmen* to ComicCon and were joined by many of the actors and one of the film's major props: the Owl Ship, which is the flying vehicle used by the Crimebusters' Nite Owl. "Our intention was always to make this film for the fans first and then we believe that pop culture will come to it," Debbie says. "And not to make it watered down for pop culture. So what better place to start—ComicCon is Ground Zero. Also, they're our harshest critics. We read the stuff on the Internet. They want everything to be exactly as it is in the graphic novel. We also have to make a good movie. We're not changing things to change them, but obviously certain things have to be changed or else it wouldn't be a good movie. It was really important for us to show the fans how much care we were putting into it and the attention to detail and the respect that we have for the graphic novel. You really have to start there and win them over or at least show them that we cared. It had to start from there. Because if they're not happy with it, then you're screwed. Especially for this. It's such the Holy Grail. Without them, there really is no *Watchmen*.

"It is visually stunning," Debbie says about the movie, "and I love that it is told in such a nonlinear way. It's fresh and imaginative. I just love how Zack tells a story. It's something that we haven't seen before. Things become so derivative and it's very rare, especially in the telling, that you see something that is completely different and yet accessible—not just bizarre for bizarre's sake. It works and it's still emotional. The visual style and how it's presented really enhance the story and the characters and their arcs. That's what I'm most impressed about."

"When you watch the movie, the experience you feel—I feel like it's very *Watchmany*," Zack says. "I know that sounds crazy and describes nothing, but there's no other way to describe it. You can't say, 'This is *Watchmen*' just because actors are saying the dialog or standing in a frame that looks like *Watchmen*. It's a more spiritual or emotional response to the material. That's the true measure of whether it's *Watchmen*-y or not. I'm pretty happy with that." ❧

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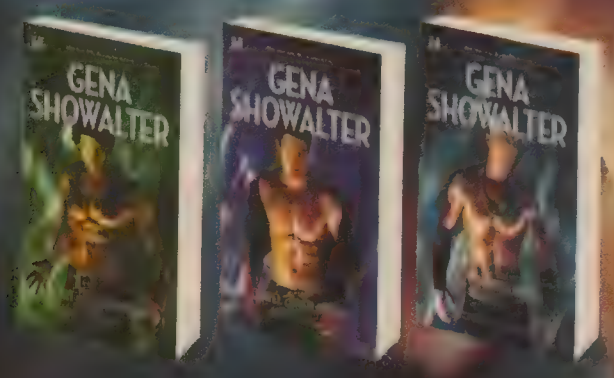

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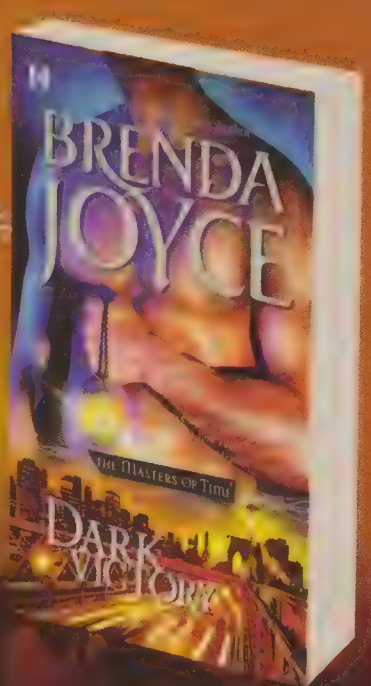

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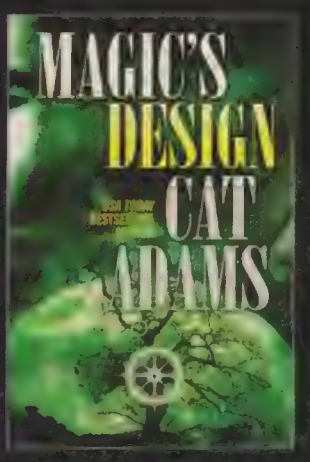

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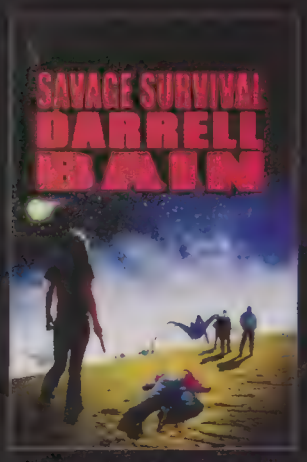

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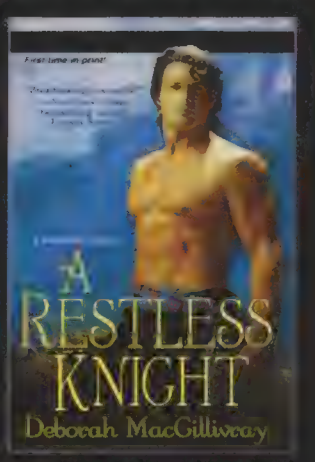

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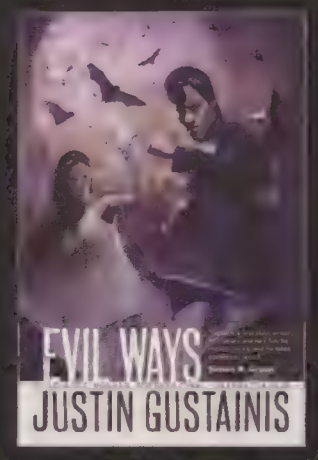

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Imagination Unrestricted by Reality

By James Ryan Gregory

Welsh folklore and myth explore the unity of male and female as embodied in the natural landscape.

There was a man who dwelt alone.
as day and night went past
he sat as still as carven stone,
and yet no shadow cast.
The white owls perched upon his head
beneath the winter moon;
they wiped their beaks and thought him dead
under the stars of June.

There came a lady clad in grey
in the twilight shining:
one moment she would stand and stay,
her hair with flowers entwining.
He woke, as had he sprung of stone,
and broke the spell that bound him;
he clasped her fast, both flesh and bone,
and wrapped her shadow round him.

There never more she walks her ways
by sun or moon or star;
she dwells below where neither days
nor any nights there are.
But once a year when caverns yawn
and hidden things awake,
they dance together then till dawn
and a single shadow make.

—J.R.R. Tolkein, *Shadow-Bride*

WHILE I WAS TRAVELING THROUGHOUT WALES AND SOUTHERN ENGLAND IN THE summers of 2004 and 2005, the mythic landscapes of ancient Britain exercised a powerful influence on my imagination. As I wandered the foothills and Iron Age forts near Lampeter and visited the stone circles of Dartmoor and Wiltshire, I could sense the potency that has inspired centuries of storytellers to their craft. These and other archaic vistas compelled me to revisit the folklore and myth of medieval Wales, including the tales of the *Mabinogion,* which often explore the primordial connections between landscape and authority, ritual and magic, in terms of feminine and masculine. They are stories rife with Otherworldly encounters, supernatural characters, and quests that pit the mortal against the immortal, the present against the past, and that place this world in contact with another. And the same curiosity that renewed my interest in the *Mabinogion* also pushed me to reconsider the nature of the divine masculine and sacred feminine in other mythological systems as well; for Wales is not the only country whose myth and folklore explores the unity of male and female as embodied in the natural landscape.

Indeed, mythological systems throughout world history have acknowledged this symbiotic dichotomy, the mutually essential roles of male and female, as the core balance of nature, the origin of human life and of the earth itself. Chinese culture, for instance, symbolizes the profound balance inherent in the human universe through the Tai-

The union of Gaia, the anthropomorphic Earth Mother, and Ouranos, Lord of the Sky, resulted in the creation of the universe. TOP: The author photographed Scorhill Tor during his travels.

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jitu, or Yin-Yang, a simple yet striking representation of opposing but complimentary opposites that stands as the central image of Taoist spirituality and Neo-Confucian philosophy. The Yin (the dark and passive symbol of feminine intuitiveness) supports and completes the Yang (the light and active symbol of masculine initiative), and both are one in the same, each containing some small portion of its partner.

And Hesiod, the Muse-inspired Greek poet who sang his stories as he tended his flocks in the foothills of Mount Helikon, recounts in his *Theogony* the sacred union that ultimately resulted in the creation of the universe. Gaia is the anthropomorphic Earth Mother in Hesiod's tradition, the feminized landscape who gives birth to the Titans after copulating with one of the few masculine beings then present, her parthenogenetic son Ouranos, Lord of the Sky. Theirs is an incestuous yet unavoidable *hieros gamos*. From these two springs the line of Kronos and of Zeus, divine ruler of gods and men, and thus begins the history that leads to the formation of the human universe.

Rhiannon's marriage to Pwyll. Otherworldly to human, represents the preservation of social order in The Mabinogion. *Alan Lee created this painting for a 1982 edition of* The Mabinogion *published by Dragon's Dream*

The ancient links between kingship, authority, and the *terra femina* also appear centuries later when Virgil, in the *Aeneid,* sets his titular hero on a divine quest to seek out a new homeland for the fallen Trojan race; to formalize his conquest of this homeland, Aeneas weds Lavinia, daughter of King Latinus, the woman who symbolizes the future hope and fertility both of the Hesperian landscape and its people. Virgil's epic owes its origins to Quintus Ennius's *Annales,* the first hexameter poem composed in Rome, in the second century BCE. Ennius recorded in annalistic fashion the great arc of Roman history, from the wanderings of Aeneas to the victories of Ennius's own patron Marcus Fulvius Nobilior. And while the text survives now only in the most fragmentary form, from the remaining pieces we know that the *Annales* included an episode alluding to the rape of Ilia, or Rhea Silvia, a descendent of Aeneas, and the mother of Romulus and Remus, by her attacker, Mars. In the extant fragment Ilia recalls a dream wherein a beautiful man (a *homo pulcer,* most likely her assailant, the god of war) seems to follow her while she attempts to communicate with the shade of her father, Numitor, in a forest grove. More than a century later the historian Livy gives a fuller account of the myth wherein Ilia, relegated to the temple of Vesta by her usurper uncle Amulius after the rape, is cast into the river Tiber along with her twin boys as punishment for having broken—albeit unwillingly—her oath of vestal virginity. However, Tiberinus, the god of the river, transforms Ilia into a sea goddess and makes her his wife while her boys are rescued and ultimately live to found the city of Rome. While she does not explicitly represent the feminized landscape in and of herself, the foundational power of Ilia's Aenean bloodline, combined with her sexual encounter with divinity and her subsequent incorporation into the landscape through the power of the river god, marks her out as an exceptional mortal counterpart for the immortal element of the created world, and her apotheosis compensates her sufferings. Ilia is then a female figure whose womb is co-opted by a divine masculine entity to ensure the future vigor, opulence, and authority of the human world, and her ancient story becomes a springboard for Virgil's later adaptation of the sacred male-female dichotomy in the persons of Aeneas and Lavinia.

Moving eastward, we will find that this notion of a divine femininity that brings prosperity, fecundity, and royal authority emerges in early Hindu tradition as well. The goddess Sri-Laksmi, wife and consort of Visnu, bestows royal power and fertility upon those earthly rulers her supernal husband favors. Social and economic order arises from the sacred marriage of Sri and Visnu; the two of them represent the ideal of productive partnership between male and female. Hindu custom also associates Sri-Laksmi with other male deities who are themselves often connected to or representative of abundance, growth, and the untamed natural world. Beyond these relations, Sri's association in some myths with Indra, king of the gods in the Hindu pantheon, guarantees that he will bring forth rain upon the land and ensure a plentiful crop, therefore securing his position as the supreme lord of all divinities. Modern Hindus still revere Sri as a goddess whose favor can guarantee a fruitful harvest, material prosperity, and fidelity in marriage.

Hindu tradition also venerates Maha Kali, a goddess who embodies the most chaotic and irrepressible of forces in the cosmos, a goddess whose associations with death, violence, rage, and the desolation of the battlefield all stand in stark contrast to the beneficent nature of deities like Sri. Kali represents the violent aspect of other Hindu goddesses, often manifested as the physical embodiment of their uncontrollable fury. Her liminal nature is suggested not only by her outward appearance and behavior—her mouth trickles with blood, she wields a dreadful sword, and is bedecked with pieces of human corpses—but by the fact that, when she is associated with a male deity (usually Siva), she serves primarily to incite him to violent and destructive behavior. Only in rare instances can the resourceful god resist Kali's temptation and in turn calm her rampages. Yet while frightful, Kali plays an important role in the created universe in certain branches of Hindu piety, notably left-handed Tantrism. The rituals of this particular form of Hinduism are, according to David Kinsley, aimed at the "uniting of opposites (male-female, microcosm-macrocosm, sacred-profane, Siva-Sakti)," a symbiosis rich with "creative tension. The Tantric adept seeks to approach Kali in all of her might in order to move beyond worldly pleasure and to understand and overcome the inevitabilities of death and disorder in the cosmos, reaching an equilibrium that is only possible when one has accepted the inevitable temporality of human existence. Kali is then a female manifestation of all that challenges and destabilizes the social order; she provides a glimpse of the opposition that must exist in to define both the masculine and feminine deities of Hindu tradition who sustain the created universe. She is the chaos that balances and defines the structure of human society, while other goddesses like Sri-Laksmi complement that structure along with their male consorts.

All of these representations of divine femininity, acting in the natural world often with the support of masculine authority, feed the collective consciousness of contemporary Western society. To cite the most obvious example from recent popular culture we find in *The DaVinci Code,* Dan Brown's novel about the lost bloodline of Jesus Christ, an author who draws upon the ancient traditions of the sacred feminine to explore the balance between mankind, religion, and the universe he inhabits. Christianity is, according to Brown's story, caught in a millennia-long struggle with those who know the truth about Christ (i.e., that he was mortal), those who revere the hallowed femininity of the created world, whose natural beauty and intense

majesty is made up of both masculine and feminine components. While Brown's text is a work of fiction, the symbiotic relationship of male and female that supports the universe has been, as outlined above, a matter of interest since the earliest days of mankind's literary activity.

And many of us, as sentient and emotional beings, cannot help but feel a connection to the natural world when faced with its raw beauty, whether that beauty is found far afield or just beyond the borders of the civilized societies we generally call home. In my case, that beauty was to be found in the Welsh heartland as well as in and around the West Country, places where Celtic roots run deep, locations of natural splendor enriched by more than a millennium of story and song celebrating the archaic links between the sacred landscape and the spirits who keep it. Known as *Annwfn* in Welsh, the Otherworld of Celtic myth frequently appears not only as a place of trial, wherein humans face challenges that require them to grow as individuals, but also as a place from which preternatural characters issue to interact with and often test the denizens of the everyday world. Annfwn is intimately connected with the landscape, often accessible only through the deepest of forests and the most secret of Faery-haunted caverns, or else by a journey over the Western sea. Welsh tradition is, from its medieval origins to the present day, replete with stories of mortals who venture into contact with Annwfn, either by chance or intention, and who are rewarded or punished based on the nature of their actions among the Tylwyth Teg, the "Fair Folk" or Faery kin, who dwell there.

In addition to the *Mabinogion*'s tales of Pwyll and of Owein, in which human men wed Otherworldly women, we find in Welsh folklore many a yarn about the marriage between a mortal man and a member of the Faery race, such as the tale of the shepherd Einion. Having become lost in a mist while looking after his herd, Einion is met by a little fat man who commands the shepherd not to speak and then leads him through a mysterious cavern into a lush green country. Once there, Einion is treated to a magnificent feast, after which his host's three attractive daughters entertain him with polite conversation. Yet no matter how hard he tries, Einion is not able to speak in return until Mererid, the most beautiful daughter, kisses his lips. The shepherd passes the proverbial year and a day with his Faery host, only gaining permission to return—temporarily—to the human world after beseeching the little man three separate times. Once in Wales, Einion visits his astonished friends and family (all of whom have given him up for dead) and then returns to Annwfn on the appointed day, weds Mererid, and is ultimately allowed to take his new bride back to his homeland for good, along with wondrous rich gifts from her father. Einion's is a tale of balance maintained between both Faery and the mortal realm through mutual respect and careful adherence, on the part of Einion himself, to the stipulations given him by the father of his Otherworldly wife.

Without love, without sense
—Traditional Welsh Proverb

World myth and folklore from India to Scandinavia abounds with similar tales of intimate interaction and exchange between mortal beings and the denizens of the supernatural realms that border the human world. But while Einion's interaction with the Fair Folk proves both lucky and lucrative, demonstrating the beneficent results of observing all the taboos and prohibitions associated with the Faery wardens of the natural world, such encounters in many traditions are more lamentable than lucky. Among the Ch'uan Miao, a hill-dwelling people of southwestern China, we find the tale of the mortal man who marries the daughter of Ryuang Lan, the dragon king. Mr. Mbla, a poor fisherman whose name apparently means "man who did not wear clothes," one day nets a fish so beautifully variegated that he can bear neither to eat it nor to set it free, and he instead decides to keep it alive, well fed, in a jar. Soon afterward Mr. Mbla becomes aware that his new pet is, in fact, a beautiful young girl named Ngan Ryuang Bang who can shift her shape at will. Having lain in wait to capture her while she wandered his house in human form, Mr. Mbla marries her and the couple lives prosperously on the food and material wealth that Bang is able to provide, until Mr. Mbla one day heeds the insincere advice of a deceitful female neighbor and disowns his bride on account of some imagined blemish in her beauty. Upon her departure, Mr. Mbla's shape-shifting wife takes with her into her birth-lake not only the couple's home—built by the power of her father and brothers—but also the seemingly endless supply of food she had heretofore provided. Mr. Mbla marries the deceitful neighbor, but he soon realizes the magnitude of his mistake when the girl first refuses to help with household chores and later decides to leave her new husband, who can no longer provide heavenly food! Mr. Mbla pines at the edge of the lake into which his lost fish-bride has disappeared, but she will not heed his calls, even though her own father urges her to do so. When Ryuang Lan finally forces his daughter to return to the surface world, she is seized by and subsequently married to an unnamed Chinese man who had heard Mr. Mbla calling at the lakeside and had stopped to help him find the girl. Mr. Mbla, equally deceitful, missed his chance to seize the fish-bride for himself because he had slipped off the previous evening to sell a bale of clothes that the Chinese man had left unguarded in his sleep. The only consolation offered Mr. Mbla is an embroidered handkerchief bestowed by his erstwhile beloved, a magical token that transforms him into an ever-living kingfisher.

Celtic tradition is not without further examples of stories of mortals who—at their own peril—either do not respect the unique opportunities given them by Otherworldly beings or who do not live up to their end of a supernatural bargain. Take, for instance, the tale of the "Lady of the Lake," a tale that is in some ways similar to that of the foolish Mr. Mbla. After carefully wooing Nelferch, the fairy maiden who resides in Llyn y Fan Fach in southern Wales, the farmer Gwyn is able to marry her on the condition that he will never strike her three causeless blows. Underscoring the magnificent fecundity that the Fair Folk command is the host of farm animals given as a dowry by Nelferch's father: sheep, cattle, goats, swine, and horses, as many of each as his daughter could count in a single breath. The couple lives happily for many years, during which time they have three sons, and during which time Gwyn, of course, accidentally inflicts upon his wife the three forbidden physical blows: the first a playful flick of a glove urging her to fetch a horse from the fields, the second a mere tap upon her shoulder to inquire why she mourns during an infant's christening, and the third a gentle touch to inquire why she rejoices at the same infant's funeral, a death that she had earlier sorrowfully foretold. Although each "blow" is physically harmless, each occurs at a point in the narrative when Gwyn attempts to influence his wife's behavior in a way of which she does not, apparently, approve. Each of these "blows" represents a transgression against the marriage covenant, one forged between a mortal man and a feminine representative of the fertile landscape. The underlying concept seems to be that mankind must recognize and respect the boundaries set for him by nature, and he must strive to maintain that balance, never attempting to influence it in any way. When she departs after suffering the third and final blow, Nelferch sings the animals of her dowry back into the lake from which they all have come:

Brindled cow, bold freckled,
Spotted cow, white speckled,
Ye four field sward mottled.
The old white-faced,
And the grey Geigen
With the white bull
From the court of the King,
And thou little black calf,
Suspended on the hook,
Come thou also, whole again, home.

Gwyn subsequently drowns himself in Llyn y Fan Fach, and the couple's three sons are left to wander the lakeside until Nelferch returns in pity and teaches them the medicinal quality of plants that grow in a special dell, thereby bestowing upon them the art of healing for which they and their descendents are long known. Gwyn's death and the sons' vigilant dedication to the memory of both parents restores balance between the worlds,

upset as it was by the farmer's breaking of the marriage contract, and the three men are rewarded accordingly.

Adversity and loss make a man wise

—Traditional Welsh Proverb

A more literary version of this mythic theme occurs in the first of the so-called "Four Branches" of the *Mabinogion,* in Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed. This king's interaction with the folk of Annwfn results in both a prosperous reign and, after a series of difficulties, a fruitful marriage with a woman of the Faery kin. Interestingly, in a manner more developed than the tales heretofore considered, the titular hero's marriage to the Otherworldly Rhiannon appears to function as a kind of foil against which the other marriages in the story are silently compared, and it demonstrates once again the careful balance required in human and Otherworldly affairs, between mortal matters and the flow of the natural world, that early myth often seems so keen to highlight.

len in the . The illus- . 1862

Besides the marriage of Pwyll and Rhiannon, a union between partners from both the mortal domain and Annwfn, we find two other important marriages in the tale, one involving individuals strictly from Annwfn and another between two purely human characters. Yet only Pwyll and Rhiannon's marriage—a union sprung from a coalescence of opposites, the Otherworld and the human one—demonstrates any long-term stability or positive benefit for kingdom or kin, no matter how difficult the situation proves to be in its early stages. Obviously then, the story deals with, among other matters, an element crucial to the preservation of social order: the marriage of a ruler and its attendant concerns. In addition to the symbolic and ritualized union of a virile human man with a woman who represented the fertility of the feminized landscape in the hopes of securing bountiful harvests, one significant goal of a leader's marriage was, in ancient cultures, the production of heirs to ensure steady and uninterrupted rule. Wifelessness and barrenness were social stigmas for anyone, but most especially then for a king. Besides learning regal etiquette and restraint from the Ruler of the Otherworld, Pwyll is faced with the challenge of not only securing but also of keeping a wife of the Fair Folk, a woman who guides him with her wisdom and gives him both legitimacy and an heir.

While hunting in the forest one day, Pwyll, the young ruler of Dyfed, comes upon a prize stag. The beast is pursued by a pack of magnificent white hounds with red ears—a sure sign of their Otherworldly status—but Pwyll nevertheless sets his own hunting dogs upon the creature, chasing off the strangely colored beasts. The Welshman's mistake becomes readily apparent, however, when the owner of the preternatural mastiffs arrives on the scene and demands restitution for the insult done him. We learn that the man whom Pwyll has affronted is none other than Arawn, the King of the Otherworld himself, and the leader of Dyfed is forced to accept his terms in order to make good the egregious error just committed. Pwyll must journey to Annwfn, where he will face and defeat in single combat the Otherworldly king's perennial opponent, a rival ruler named Hafgan, whose name might possibly be related to the Welsh words for summer (*haf*) and winter (*gaeaf*) and might, therefore, represent an element of the perpetual struggle between life and death in the natural world so often explored in early myth and traditional folktale. Arawn, after indicating that Pwyll can win his friendship by resolving the situation, by offering restitution and re-establishing balance through exchange, then explains how Pwyll will fulfill his end of the bargain:

I will make a firm alliance with you. What I shall do is to put you in my place in Annwfn, and give you the most beautiful woman you have ever seen to sleep with you every night, and give you my face and form so that no chamberlain nor officer nor any other person who has ever served me shall know that you are not me. All this, . . . from tomorrow until the end of the year, and then we shall meet again in this place.

Arawn next shares the one way in which Hafgan can be destroyed—a single blow—and indicates that he has faced this adversary before, an echo of the seasonal and cyclical character of the liminal Otherworld and its inhabitants. The mysterious king finishes the terms of the deal by explaining that he will go in Pwyll's form to rule in Dyfed over the course of the year. The Welshman succeeds in his appointed task, although he deliberately avoids sleeping with Arawn's queen during his sojourn in the Otherworld to prove his faithfulness and his regret at having insulted the supernatural sovereign. At the same time, Arawn rules Dyfed more prosperously than it has ever been ruled before, setting a positive example for Pwyll to follow upon his return. When the whole ruse is finally revealed to the people and courtiers of each realm, Pwyll is granted a new title, *Pwyll Pen Annwfn,* Pwyll Head of Annwfn. But while Pwyll has managed to achieve balance for the Otherworld by destroying Hafgan, and by deliberately preserving the honor of its queen, he has yet to create such equilibrium in his own domain, although Arawn's rule there has proven a solid starting point. The quest for balance through the winning and keeping of a queen for his own little kingdom is the task that occupies Pwyll during the remainder of the tale.

To have prudence is to have everything

—Traditional Welsh Proverb

Having learned consideration and manners from Arawn, Pwyll wins himself an Otherworldly wife, Rhiannon, in the second portion of the story. Due to Pwyll's unassuming nature, however, Rhiannon is essentially forced to court him and the hapless fellow almost loses his new bride to a scheming rival except for the fact that she proves craftier than either man. Although he is finally able to wed Rhiannon, Pwyll's marriage is, in the third and final section of the story, initially fruitless and the king's retainers urge him to find a new mate, since Rhiannon has thus far failed to bring forth a male child (or any other child for that matter). Pwyll manages, however, to allay his men's unease and within a year his wife gives birth to a baby boy. But one night soon thereafter the child disappears without a trace and Rhiannon's chamber women, concerned for their own lives at having lost the boy, accuse the queen of killing her own baby. Pwyll still resists the demands of his countrymen to abandon his wife and, instead of banishment or death, her punishment is to wait by the horseblock outside the royal residence, to relate to passersby her tale of woe, and to offer them a ride upon her back up to the castle itself.

We should note here that Pwyll does not treat his Faery wife as a piece of property, although those around him seem to regard her so. Arawn, we remember, offered his nameless queen's sexual pleasures to Pwyll without hesitation; a strange license indeed,

but perhaps a necessary one given the circumstances. (Only Pwyll, although he committed quite an error of etiquette against Arawn, seems able to defeat Hafgan, to restore balance, so perhaps Otherworld kings must facilitate as well as coerce their champions.) But Pwyll seems to have taken a lesson from his earlier experiences and treats his wife with the patience and respect that others are not willing to afford her. He avoids damning her entirely and manages to keep her relatively safe until her innocence can be proven later; in the larger sense, this preserves balance. Pwyll was given a second chance by the king of the Otherworld, and Rhiannon herself had guided him with her shrewd advice on more than one occasion prior to this, so Pwyll in turn offers his Otherworldly spouse the benefit of the doubt.

Wittingly or otherwise, Pwyll's actions here further the reciprocity between Dyfed and Annwfn, specifically in regard to repayment for the good will offered him in the past by beings from the Otherworld. Of course, Rhiannon did not kill her child; he was kidnapped by some terrible yet faceless monster and he is rescued by Teyrnon, one of Pwyll's most loyal retainers. Although Teyrnon saves the boy's life without any knowledge of his true identity, and although he and his wife decide to foster the child since they have no children of their own, they ultimately return the precocious youngster to his parents upon realizing his true origin years later. Teyrnon recognizes the similarities specifically between Pwyll and the boy, leaving Rhiannon out of the matter and rendering her essentially inconsequential, almost as nameless as Teyrnon and Arawn's wives. The nobleman is concerned not only with stopping the queen's unjust humiliation, but also with ensuring that the king has a successor once again, that the land can be guaranteed a ruler in the years to come. Without children, a marriage lacks a good deal of its purpose, especially the marriage of a king, and characters throughout the Four Branches are careful to avoid such a situation.

As mentioned above, the union of Pwyll and Rhiannon serves as a kind of foil against which the other marriages in the tale can be measured, especially in regard to the concept of balance and exchange between the human world and the realm of Faery in early myth and legend. Each of the three primary couples present in the story—Pwyll and Rhiannon, Arawn and the Queen of Annwfn, Teyrnon and his wife—represents a different possible combination of mortal and Otherworldly partners as well as the results of that combination. While Arawn and his wife, both of them Otherworldly beings, are, in fact, the first married couple to appear in the story, we do not immediately see them together. Furthermore, they are explicitly based in Annwfn, and theirs is, apparently, a childless union. In the central episode, we witness the first meetings and eventual marriage of Pwyll and Rhiannon, a couple made up of a human and an Otherworldly individual, and they eventually have a son, albeit after serious concern on the part of the king's men and a good deal of hardship subsequent to the birth. The final episode of the tale presents us with Teyrnon and his wife—another unnamed woman whose identity, like that of Arawn's queen, is wholly subsumed in her husband's—and they are both unquestionably mortal, although their farm is plagued by the annual raiding of some preternatural beast. Just like Arawn's marriage, and in contrast to Pwyll's, Teyrnon's union is barren. This becomes apparent when Teyrnon first finds the infant in his stable and presents it to his wife; he tells her specifically that he is giving to her "something you have never had," indicating that they have never been able to have children, even though it can reasonably be assumed that they, as a married couple, have tried.

Rhiannon is the only woman who weds outside of her environ by seeking a mortal man from Dyfed as opposed to one from Annwfn. In the second portion of the First Branch, Rhiannon deliberately works against her arranged marriage to Gwawl, a suitor of her own kind, so that she can marry the mortal Pwyll. The other two marriages in the story are between individuals who share a common place of origin, and both marriages are barren: the wives are never named, a subtle but crucial symptom of their greatly diminished, if not wholly eclipsed, reproductive power. Only the marriage of an Otherworldly woman to a human man is explicitly shown to be productive, reinforcing the ancient ties between the world of mortal men and the feminized landscape embodied in the liminal realm of Annwfn.

Examples of this model could be recounted incessantly; the *Mabinogion*'s Arthurian romance "Owein," also known as "The Countess of the Fountain," relates the story of an adventurous young knight who tries to prove his own valor against a powerful Faery warrior. The warrior guards a sacred grove, composed of a well, a rock, and a tree, which symbolizes the nurturing feminine essence of the created world that, when abused or neglected, can bring great harm to the inhabitants of the kingdom. Owein defeats the fountain knight, claims his Faery queen as his own, and rules her Otherworldly domain for many years. Although the lady is at first unwilling to take Owein as her new husband—he did, after all, kill her former mate—she is compelled by the fact that the fountain, the symbol of her feminine potency embodied in the landscape, must have a masculine counterpart, a powerful sentinel, to keep safe her kingdom's most precious resource. Not unlike the First Branch, "The Countess of the Fountain" demonstrates that a realm is guaranteed prosperity and a successful rule only through the union of a human man and the feminine representative of the land over which he must keep guard.

This concept of sacred marriage in legend and folklore, of a man and woman whose union symbolizes the ancient ties and responsibilities between mortal kind and the world we inhabit, is attested throughout world myth. From the religious traditions of India and Asia to the classical epics of ancient Greece and Rome to the folktales of Scandinavia and the Celtic fringe, we find repeated expressions of this primal, fundamental dichotomy.

The sacred isle to which King Arthur is borne after his final battle is a Faery home, a place of healing hidden in the landscape of ancient Britain and carefully guarded by the fey women who bring him there. In modern works whose genres range from the thriller novel to the fantasy epic, we find echoes of this primeval concept. Dan Brown's imaginative treatment of the sacred feminine serves as the backdrop for a globe-trotting murder mystery, while in Tolkien's Middle-Earth, Aragorn, mortal king of Arnor and Gondor, takes as his queen the elf maiden Arwen to rule his lands in peace and prosperity until the end of his long life. Even the sylvan master of leaf and blade Tom Bombadil dwells with his beloved Goldberry, daughter of the river-woman Withywindle, beneath the trees of the Old Forest; theirs is an immortal pairing with deep ties to nature, symbolizing perhaps the purest good in all of Tolkein's vast sub-created world. The mythic notion of a sacred union that guarantees the potency of a ruler and the landscape over which he governs seems to suggest that human affairs are capable of smoothest operation only when tempered by the influence of the immortal realms that so closely mirror the world of man. This notion of a divinely linked masculinity and femininity informs all of the traditions—Asian, Greek, Roman, Hindu, and Celtic—discussed in this brief essay, and each of these traditions holds sacred the union between male and female embodied in the spiritualized landscape. In the First Branch of the *Mabinogion*, the focus on the Otherworld, a place closely associated with the wilderness, might further imply that man's relationships ought to be guided by the flow of the natural world around him, a world from which he is not so separate as he might sometimes believe.❧

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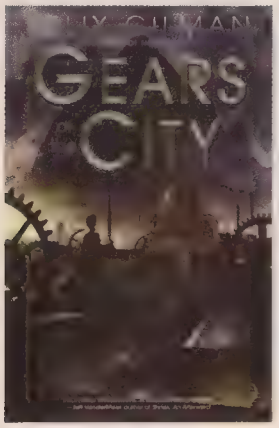
By Paul Witcover & Matt Staggs



Gears of the City bristles with imagination and inventiveness.

SOME MYSTERIES ARE BETTER LEFT UNSOLVED. UNRESOLVED POSSIBILITIES glimmer with potential, while explanations inevitably risk disappointment, because the solution to a mystery may be so much less interesting, so much smaller, than what it replaces. Especially in fantasy, if you're going to pull back the curtain, you'd better be sure that the revelation is at least on the same scale as the mystery, if not grander. This doesn't mean it can't be a deflationary moment—think of Toto pulling aside the curtain in the Emerald City. A trick adopted by many writers is to provide a solution that simultaneously ups the ante by introducing a new, even greater mystery—of such strategies are sequels born. Which brings me to ***Gears of the City*** (Bantam, New York, hardcover, 464 pp., $24.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-80677-9), Felix Gilman's flawed, sometimes frustrating, but ultimately engrossing follow-up to his brilliant first novel, *Thunderer.*

Thunderer introduced the god-thronged metropolis of Ararat, a city teeming with Dickensian vitality. More than just the setting of the novel, the protean city was a character in its own right—arguably the main character. The plot revolved around a handful of men and women whose lives are suddenly altered by the ephemeral appearance of a god—the Great Bird. The central figures were Silk, a charismatic boy invested with the power of flight, and Arjun, an idealistic young monk from faraway Gad whose search for his people's missing god, the Voice, has led him inevitably to god-central.

Silk, alas, is missing from *Gears of the City,* and Gilman supplies no new figure of comparable magnetism and energy; I felt the absence of Silk and his buoyant, glittering spirit very keenly. Without that spirit, in whatever form, the new novel feels sluggish in comparison to its predecessor: earthbound, unable to soar. Not that this isn't a strong effort, head and shoulders above most fantasy; just that it doesn't rise to the dazzling heights of *Thunderer.* But then, few novels do.

At the end of Thunderer, Arjun, having learned and mastered a time-and-space-spanning method of travel through the hidden passageways linking Ararat's seemingly infinite iterations, departed in quest of his god toward the Mountain—a towering landmark that "exists in every part of the city, in every Age." The Mountain is a substantial paradox, near yet remote, its influence omnipresent yet ineffable. Legends, myths, and rumors surround it; some say it is not a mountain at all, but a kind of palace, home to a nameless god or gods, or perhaps a machine built by those gods, while others claim it is itself a god, or even something beyond godhood. Only one thing is known for certain about the Mountain: those that somehow manage to get there—an almost impossible feat—are never seen or heard from again. Or so, at any rate, it's widely believed among the small and viciously competitive fraternity of travelers and explorers who share Arjun's ability and turn it to less benign pursuits than the search for a missing god; fear of what awaits them on the Mountain is balanced against greed for treasure or need for knowledge, and this balance, even in Arjun's case, always tips sooner or later toward the Mountain.

All of them, as it turns out, learned to walk the secret ways in the same manner Arjun did: from a shadowy figure called, among other aliases, Shay. Readers of *Thunderer* will recall the somewhat peripheral if decidedly sinister Shay ... and also recall (spoiler alert!) his richly deserved fate, from which any sort of recovery or escape seemed unlikely. But as was implied in that novel, and is more fully set forth in this one, Shay's mode of travel has brought other versions of himself, time-cast shadows, into being, and it was perhaps one of these shadows, rather than the original Shay, that Arjun and Silk so memorably disposed of. The mystery of Shay is one of the central mysteries of *Gears;* indeed, all the other mysteries, including that of the Mountain, are bound up with Shay, whoever or whatever he may be.

Gears opens some time after the events of *Thunderer,* though it's hard even for Arjun to say precisely how long: his sense of linear time has become hopelessly muddled by years of fruitless back-and-forthing between diverse pasts, futures, and alternate realities that seem to have an equivalent claim on existence. A brief prologue details Arjun's decision, at last, to attempt the Mountain—and his abject failure. He escapes damaged in mind and body; to lose his pursuers, enigmatic "hollow men" evocative of the creepy aliens in the movie *Dark City,* Arjun jettisons his memories bit by bit, until he has given up everything, including his identity and his name, his knowledge of how to walk the secret ways, even his memory of the Voice.

He awakens to consciousness in a dark cellar of a museum in the shabby district of Fosdyke, which is so near the Mountain that ghostly visitants from apocalyptic near-futures regularly haunt its citizens. There Arjun meets a monster, a long-lived lizard creature who provides him with his missing name—though at a terrible price. The Beast, as he is called, is a chilling creation, an object of horror and pity reminiscent of Frankenstein's monster. He, too, has a history with Shay, and is on a quest of his own that is like a dark twin of Arjun's.

Arjun escapes the cellar and is taken in by two sisters, Marta and Ruth Low; a third sister, Ivy, lives with a man called Brace-Bel—unwittingly, or so her sisters say. Once he has recovered somewhat, Arjun, who has developed strong feelings for Ruth, sets out to free Ivy from Brace-Bel ... only to discover that she is happy where she is, and that Brace-Bel is a lunatic

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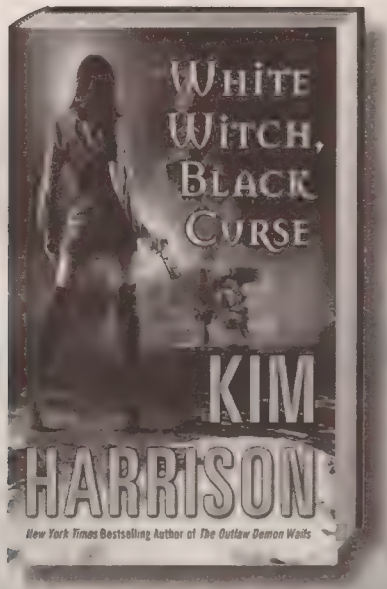

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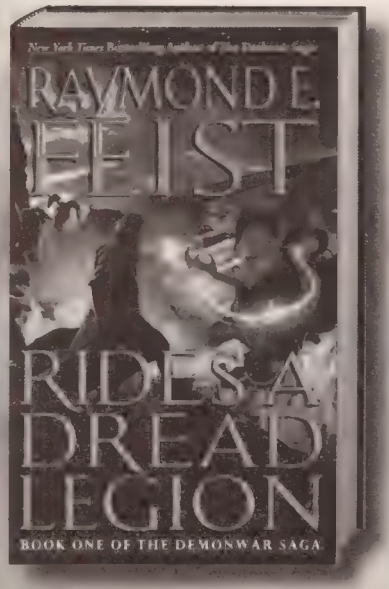

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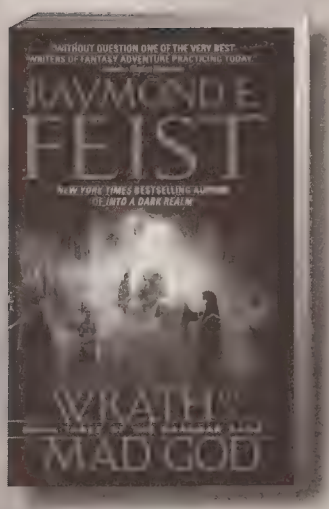

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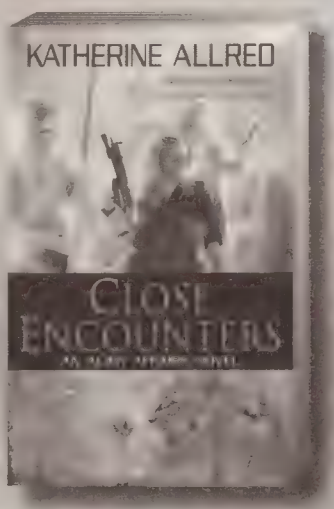

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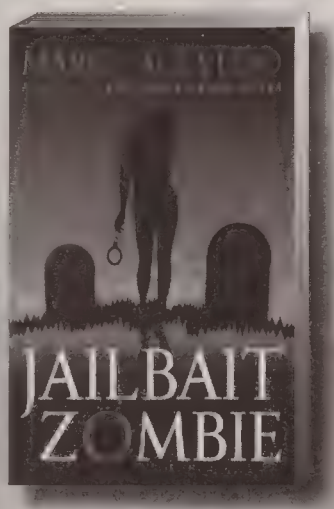

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whose madness derives from his acquaintance with the ubiquitous Shay. Brace-Bel, "a strikingly ugly little man," is a memorable grotesque, another monster obsessed with Shay. Indeed, there is no one in this novel who has not been rendered monstrous by contact with Shay; he corrupts all that he touches.

Meanwhile, it is no longer quite as necessary to go to the Mountain, for the Mountain has begun to come to Fosdyke; or, rather, to send emissaries there, not only the aforementioned hollow men, who continue to search for Arjun, but fleets of flying machines that bomb the district into even more of a shambles than it is already. Has Arjun's assault on the Mountain, and his escape, triggered this response? Or is there another explanation?

The answers to these questions and more are to be found on the Mountain, and Arjun inevitably must retrace his steps, recovering both his memory and his powers. As the trajectories of plot carry the main characters up the slopes of the Mountain, to an uncertain future, dark secrets from the past illuminate hidden connections between them. Yet so complicated and tangled are these connections, and so mysterious yet omnipresent is the Mountain itself, that I felt as if Gilman had become caught up in a self-imposed requirement to make sense of them all, to reduce them to a meaningful revelation: to pull back the curtain with a magician's triumphant flourish and expose some kind of paradigm-shattering truth. Yet what he reveals seems too small, too ordinary, too predictable; it left me feeling let down. Don't get me wrong: *Gears of the City* is a powerful novel, bristling with imagination and inventiveness. Gilman is a gifted writer, an elegant stylist. But I had the sense that he began to suspect his sprawling novel was getting away from him and felt impelled to bring it under control; in doing so, he diminished it.

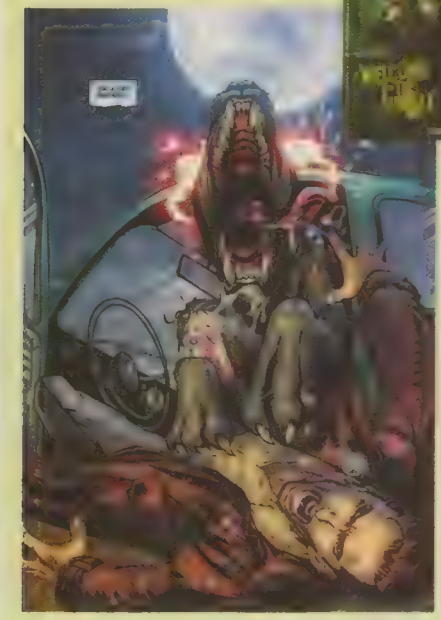
Christopher Barzak's first novel, the Crawford Award-winning *One for Sorrow,* was an extraordinary debut, a seductive, deeply unsettling ghost story written with verve and authenticity from the point of view of a smart, sensitive teenage boy whose macabre fascination with another teenager's gruesome death translates him by slow, almost imperceptible degrees across the razor-thin boundary that normally separates the living and the dead, the

GRAPHIC NOVEL REVIEWS

BY JEFF VANDERMEER

The Dresden Files: Welcome to the Jungle, Jim Butcher and Ardian Syaf, Del Rey, New York City, hardcover, 160 pp., $19.95, ISBN 978-0-345-50746-4.

Unless you've been living in a cave or under a rock, you've probably at least heard about Jim Butcher's *New York Times* bestselling Dresden Files novels, which feature professional wizard and amateur detective Harry Dresden. The novels combine elements of noir mystery with supernatural fantasy.



Now Butcher has created his first Harry Dresden graphic novel—and it's a great start to a whole new dimension of the Dresden Files. As an illustrated narrative, *The Dresden Files: Welcome to the Jungle* will remind readers of Mike Mignola's *Hellboy* with its offbeat sense of humor and of *Constantine* in its seriously imaginative approach to the macabre. *Welcome to the Jungle* takes place before the first Dresden Files novel, *Storm Front.* It begins with a brutal mauling at the Lincoln Park Zoo. A security guard is dead, and the circumstances are peculiar. The culprit turns out to be a "rawhead-and-bloody-bones," formed from "the leftovers at a slaughterhouse." As narrator Harry says, "They start on rats and move up the food chain. If you don't stomp them quick, pretty soon they start piling up human corpses for their meal times." But vanquishing the rawhead is just the start of a convoluted story in which Harry must fight a hidden enemy who likes to work through proxies.

Butcher does a good job of moving the story forward while giving us some background on Harry's character. The supernatural elements of the plot might be somewhat familiar, but are professionally executed. The only "thinness" here might be in the way Butcher adds Harry's love interest.

Overall, though, I was very impressed with this first installment. New artist Ardim Syaf's imagery is detailed, clean, and inventive. There's a decent amount of texture and grit to the scenes. Butcher's creation proves a good match with the graphic novel format. If you're already a fan, this new adventure will enthrall you. If you're new to Butcher's world, this is a great introduction, with all the context you'll need to enjoy the novels.

Dungeon Monstres Vol. 2: The Dark Lord, Joann Sfarr, Lewis Trondheim, Andreas, and Stephane Blanquet, Nantier-Beall-Minoustchine, New York City, trade paperback, 96 pp., $12.95, ISBN 978-1-56163-540-5.

Filling in narrative gaps around *Dungeon Twilight Vol. 2: Armageddon, Monstres Vol. 2* features some of the same delights as that former high point in the Dungeon series. Namely, the genius-level depiction of the fantasy world of Terra Amata exploding into pieces, with its inhabitants forced to cling to floating islands. Against this backdrop, Sfar and Trondheim present two stories: "The Great Map" and "The Dark Lord."

"The Great Map" features Dungeon regular Marvin the Red, a vaguely rabbit-like creature with two sharp fangs, glowing yellow eyes, and red armor with rockets in the arms. Thrust into the reality of a fragmented planet, Marvin is tasked with finding a map of the new world, which "includes all of the islets and predicts their rotations in space." In so doing, Marvin almost immediately runs afoul of the Dark Lord, an evil and powerful, er, duck. There's a fair amount of slapstick in "The Great Map," as there always is when Marvin's the protagonist. But the predominant tone is one of awe, because the artwork depicting the disintegrated world is so good. Longtime fans will also be happy that the Dust King makes an appearance.

"The Dark Lord" has a different feel. The first half is set in the Dark Lord's stronghold, a creepy dungeon populated with some wonderfully creative depictions of the DL's monster minions. One of the more hilarious cameos is provided by "Sri Panda Pashtun, the head of intelligence," who has "two pairs of eyes and four brains" and is "unbeatable at chess." Halfway through this tale, Terra Amata falls apart and the Dark Lord and his hench-beings must deal with the consequences. The full-page, red-and-black spread in which a certain fortress explodes is one of the pictorial highlights.

Any fan of the Dungeon series will love *Monstres Vol. 2,* which is a vast improvement over *Monstres Vol. 1.* This second volume provides an invaluable tie-in to the main series. The plots are crisp and lively. The art remains a treasure, among the most imaginative in graphic novels today. By a stroke of luck, I have this volume in the large-sized original French edition. Somehow, though, reducing the art to a smaller format increases its vitality rather than the opposite. Highly recommended. ❧

mundane and the uncanny. An audacious feat of sympathy and mimicry combining pulp sensibility with high literary craftsmanship, it was one of my favorite novels of 2007. Now Barzak is back with ***The Love We Share Without Knowing*** (Bantam, New York, trade paperback, 292 pp., $12.00, ISBN: 978-0-553-38564-9), a novel similarly concerned with that weirdly permeable boundary. It's a richly mosaic affair whose parts glimmer with meaningful interconnections, some obvious, others more subtle, that gradually come to delineate a mysterious web of relationships whose full extent is perceivable only by readers, though Barzak's lonely, isolated, occasionally suicidal characters do have moments of heightened awareness in which they sense the presence of this web and their place in it.

The novel is set in modern-day Japan and features both Western (mainly American) and Japanese characters who to varying degrees are mourning lost loves or looking for new ones, fixated on past or future at the expense of the present. Barzak spent two years teaching English in Japan, and his depiction of place and people rings with the authority of lived experience. Elements of Japanese mythology, notably legends concerning ghosts and shape-shifting fox spirits, play an important part in these interwoven narratives, but even more weighty is the notion that concepts of ego and individuality are questionable if not illusory, and that behind the veil of what passes for reality is something both less distinct and more enduring. It's tempting to equate this with Buddhist and/or Zen metaphysics, and certainly those elements are present, but it appears to me that Barzak's interest in such ontological questions goes deeper than the influence of an exotic culture: he seems a writer of Rilkean sensitivity and openness, and by no means the least of this novel's many pleasures are its small moments of exquisitely observed or intuited states of mind and heart expressed with quiet precision and originality—small moments that open vistas of staggering inner consequence.

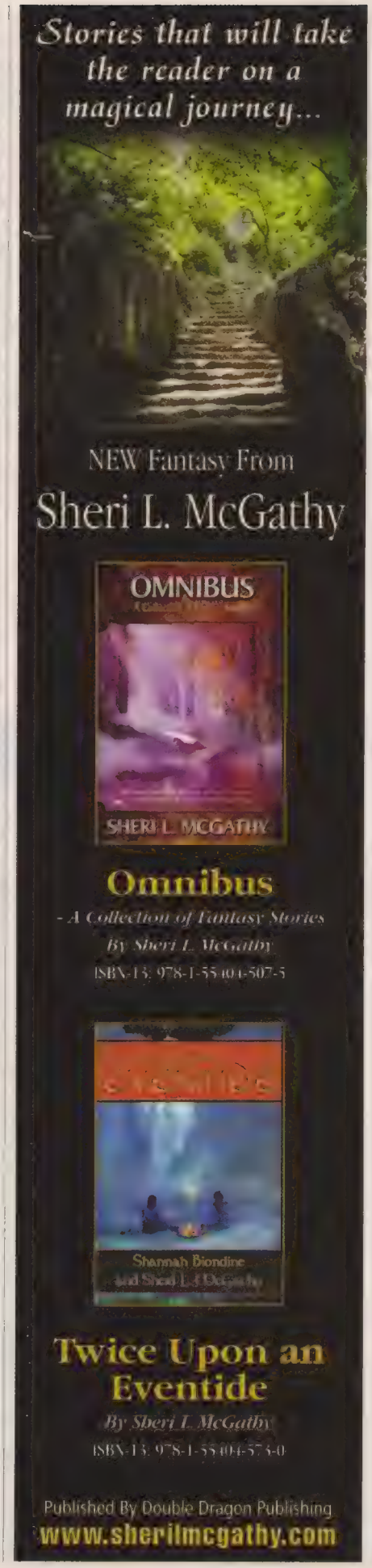
Each chapter is almost a stand-alone short-story. Yet recurring characters and events link them together, and deeper connections exist below the surface. The novel proceeds by means of revelation rather than causality; the story doesn't go from point A to point Z, as in a traditional narrative: it's already complete, a totality hidden from readers and characters alike, and with each chapter a little more of the full picture comes into view. Yet by the novel's end, though much has been revealed, those revelations haven't stripped away any of the mystery; if anything, they've enhanced it.

In the first chapter, "Realer Than You," we meet a disgruntled sixteen-year-old American boy named Elijah Fulton, who has been dragged to Japan against his will by his father's job. There, in a deserted shrine in the woods nearby his house, he encounters a numinous fox—then, later, becomes friends with a girl wearing a fox costume who gives her name as Midori. Elijah becomes convinced that the fox by the shrine and Midori are one and the same, but things are far more complicated than that, for the real identity of his new friend is both stranger and more ordinary than he can imagine. To say more would be to reveal a spoiler, but Midori's identity and her history are central to the novel, and Barzak returns to her again and again—sometimes fairly obliquely, as in the next chapter, "The Suicide Club," in which four acquaintances decide to commit group suicide, a trendy pastime in Japan—and sometimes directly, as in the penultimate chapter, "Day of the Dead," wherein a childhood friend of Midori's finally comes to terms with their shared past, and in the final chapter, "A Thousand Tails," which is narrated by Midori herself and bends the arc of the novel into a full circle.

Midori's history, though key, is but one of the narrative threads that Barzak spins out for readers to follow. A peripheral character in "The Suicide Club" is Nobuo, the callous boyfriend of one of the club members; this young man, a punk musician, returns in "If You Can Read This You're Too Close," wherein he is seen on a subway train by a blind man—a small miracle with life-changing repercussions. He will appear in other chapters as well, and so will a handful of other characters whose paths cross with seeming serendipity: an American man trapped in an ensorcelled sleep by his jealous Japanese lover, and four American language teachers who, whether they know it or not, have come to Japan in search of escape or salvation.

Barzak employs the fantastic without ostentation. He's utterly matter-of-fact about his ghosts and other supernatural manifestations, and his characters share this aplomb, some because they are too numb to feel anything, others because they are open enough to accept anything. Many of the chapters take place under the inscrutable gaze of the 394-foot-tall Great Buddha of Ushiku, which looms over the characters and events of the novel like the gigantic eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg in *The Great Gatsby*, only more benignly.

World Fantasy Award-winner Margo Lanagan has received a lot of well-deserved acclaim for her fiercely iconoclastic short fiction, which, employing an incandescent literary style, with language that runs the gamut from the earthily colloquial to levels of visionary poetic intensity, reworks traditional fairy tale elements from a staunchly feminist perspective (which can give them a somewhat dated feel, as if Lanagan is fighting old battles, or, rather, using old weapons to fight battles that remain very much in need of fighting). The writer she reminds me of most is Angela Carter, but Lanagan is a distinct talent. Although she has written a number of young adult novels published in her native Australia, the exquisitely titled ***Tender Morsels*** (Knopf, New York, hardcover, 442 pp., $16.99, ISBN: 978-0-375-84811-7) is the first of them to be



published in the U.S., and it embodies all the qualities of her short fiction.

I should warn potential readers that, like so much of what is published today under the YA rubric, *Tender Morsels* is really an adult novel—not so much because of its treatment of sexuality, which is pretty rough and direct, but because it has quite evidently been written without any thought of targeting a particular age group. . Thus, its true audience is probably any intelligent reader over the age of twelve or thirteen who can be ravished by inventive language and is open to the shocks and seductions of an imagination that is subversive in the best sense, determined to shine its light into some very dark places of the human heart.

The darkness is on display from the first chapter, when we are introduced to the character of Liga Longfield, a young girl kept in a state of sexual slavery by her brutish lout of a father, who purchases abortifacients from a local witch, Muddy Annie, to induce miscarriages whenever Liga conceives. The two live on the outskirts of a small village in that timeless bucolic setting shared by so many fairy tales and fantasies, and such is Liga's isolation and ignorance that initially she doesn't equate her bloody miscarriages with pregnancy, or pregnancy with her father's unwelcome attentions. But she is not stupid, and at last she pieces things together and determines to defy her father and give birth to her next child. Her father is equally determined to stop her, and visits Muddy Annie again—only to meet with a deadly mishap on his return, which leaves Liga free to give birth. But without her father to protect her, Liga becomes a target of other men, and some months after giving birth to a daughter, she is the victim of a gang rape perpetrated by local youths. Injured in body and despondent in spirit, she decides to kill herself and her unnamed infant by leaping from a high precipice—but is prevented from doing so by the intervention of a mysterious, numinous presence that gifts her with two jewels and instructs her to bury them at the front and back doors of her hovel.

When she awakens the next morning, her wounds are magically healed. Gradually, as she explores farther from her home, venturing even into the nearby village, it becomes clear to us that she has been transported into an alternate version of her previous existence, one from which all danger and unpleasantness—such as the boys who raped her—have been cleanly excised. There she gives birth to another daughter, whom she names Urdda. Years pass in this blandly pleasant limbo, with Urdda and her older sister, Branga, growing apace.

Meanwhile, back in the "real" world, two events occur that will have momentous impact on Liga's idyllic refuge. First, a dwarf, or "littlee-man," named Collaby Dought, a boyhood chum and lover of Annie's now fallen on hard times, induces her to use her magic to send him to his own personal heaven—only to wind up in Liga's instead. Dought is a wonderful character, vile but vital, a wheedling, profane schemer who gives the novel a needed jolt of energy and humor. Dought learns to translate himself back and forth between worlds, using Liga's world as a kind of bank from which he can withdraw limitless funds, as common objects there become jewels in the primary realm.

Shortly thereafter, another visitor enters Liga's world—a young man named Davit who, in the course of a fertility festival in the village, dresses up as a rampaging bear and somehow stumbles from one reality to the other, in the process transforming into an actual bear, albeit one with some memory of its human identity. This bear, or Bear, becomes a beloved companion to the girls and an object of sensual comfort to Liga, before, after a span of years, returning home and becoming human again—at the exact moment he had originally vanished. Thus we

NEW YOUNG ADULT FANTASY BOOKS BY MICHAEL JONES

Eon: Dragoneye Reborn, by Alison Goodman, Viking, December 2008. Eon wants nothing more than to be chosen as the next Dragoneye apprentice, one of a select few who can bond with the spirit dragons that protect the land and its people. However, Eon has a secret, one that would mean his death were it revealed: "he" is really a girl, forbidden to become a Dragoneye by ancient tradition. Against all odds, a dragon chooses Eon, thus setting into motion a series of bold political gambles and kingdom-shattering events. Can Eon discover her dragon's true nature and name, and claim its power before all hope is lost and her deception is exposed? With a bold, memorable heroine and an epic, sweeping plot, *Eon: Dragoneye Reborn* is an excellent read, one I couldn't put down. It's got adventure, mystery, swordplay, mysticism, and intrigue— what more can you ask for? I can't wait to see how this series turns out.

Lament: The Faerie Queen's Deception, by Maggie Stiefvater, Flux, October 2008. Deirdre's ordered existence is thrown into turmoil when inexplicably magical things start happening around her, even as the mysterious, sexy Luke Dillon insinuates himself into her life. Their newfound romance takes a hit when Deirdre discovers she's a cloverhand, possessed of strange powers and able to see Faeries, and that Luke is a Faerie assassin sent to control or kill her. Now they're both caught up in a deadly game of political and magical machinations, one that will affect not just Deirdre, but her friends and family as well. *Lament* is a gorgeous, gripping tale highly reminiscent of Emma Bull, Holly Black, or Charles de Lint, full of magic, music, mystery, and romance. With richly developed characters and an excellent take on the Fae, it makes for great reading. I absolutely loved this book.

Selkie Girl, by Laurie Brooks, Alfred A. Knopf, October 2008. Forever shunned by outsiders for her webbed hands and love of the sea, Elin Jean yearns for acceptance beyond her family, and a life beyond the simple croft she calls home. At last, she discovers her true heritage: half human, half selkie, part of two worlds without belonging to either one. Whether on land as a girl, or in the sea as a seal, she struggles to find her home and her destiny. But which life will she choose when it comes down to a choice between family and love? Haunting, lyrical, and beautiful, *Selkie Girl* is a well-crafted historical fantasy that sets the myth of the selkie against a Scottish backdrop to great effect.

Palace of Mirrors, by Margaret Peterson Haddix, Simon & Schuster, September 2008. All her life, Cecilia has been told she's the rightful heir to Suala, raised in hiding while a decoy lives out her life as princess, until the enemies of the royal family are exposed. When those enemies come for Cecilia, she decides the time is right to reclaim her throne. With her best friend, Harper, in tow, she sets out to do just that, only to discover she's not the only claimant to the throne, and not all is what it seems to be. In this clever twist on the old "princess in hiding" theme, Haddix brings us a strong-willed, highly capable heroine forced to cope with situations she never could have imagined. It's a fun read, and a welcome return to the world of Haddix's *Just Ella*.

Worldweavers: Cybermage, by Alma Alexander, Eos, February

learn that time passes at differing rates in the two worlds.

But the entrance of these interlopers knocks a balance askew, and awakens a desire in Urdda to visit the "real" world for herself. When she crosses over, further imbalances accrue, and soon enough it becomes plain to Urdda, and to Annie, whom she meets and befriends, that a dangerous process is underway, one beyond Annie's power to correct; hope of restoration and healing lies with a more powerful witch, the stern Miss Dance.

Echoes of such well-known fairy tales as "Snow White and Rose Red," "Rumplestiltskin," "Hansel and Gretel," "Little Red Riding Hood," "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," and others are obvious even in this cursory summary, but Lanagan delves into them with incisive insight, adapting them to her purpose by fastening on inherent aspects that have been forgotten or overlooked. Fairy tales have always had a moral dimension, but what the modern world has lost sight of in many respects is how ambiguous and complex that dimension can be. Lanagan makes these familiar tales strange—and dangerous—again. Even more: she makes them her own.

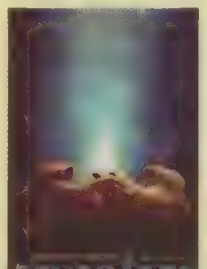
Space Magic (Wheatland Press, Wilsonville, OR, trade paperback, 276 pp., $20.00, ISBN: 978-0-9794054-3-3) collects fifteen short stories by David L. Levine, including his gently whimsical 2006 Hugo Award-winner, "Tk'Tk'Tk," about a hapless salesman stranded on a world whose bizarre culture seems inimical to the concepts of trade and profit. Levine is a multitalented author whose fertile, wide-ranging imagination is—as his title implies—equally at home in the fields of fantasy and science fiction. Regardless of their subject matter, these stories share the playfulness and exuberance that marks a young writer stretching himself, testing himself against his literary antecedents and finding his own voice. In "Wind from a Dying Star," for example, Levine's debt to Gregory Benford's muscular yet humanistic science fiction is apparent, but this far-future tale of humans seemingly evolved to thrive in the vastnesses of space blasts off in unpredictable and deeply moving directions. One other thing Levine's stories share is a close attention to detail, a meticulous grounding in the physicality of things and people, and a corresponding awareness of the social bonds that glue a society together for good and ill, whether that society consists of steelworkers haunted by the ghosts of job-related fatalities, as in "Brotherhood," or the superstitious citizens of a village whose weather-working wizard has died, which is the case in "Zauberschrift." Even when the focus is on a specific character or characters, he never loses sight of the larger picture. The best of these stories combine the mythic power of fantasy with the sense of wonder only science fiction can provide, and what is to my mind the standout of the collection, "The Tale of the Golden Eagle," does this superbly. This compact gem about "a bird, a ship, a machine, a woman—she was all these things, and none"—is a space-going fairy tale that packs all the adventure and emotional punch of a novel into a mere twenty pages.

Have pirates jumped the shark? I confess I thought so, until I picked up ***Fast Ships, Black Sails*** (Night Shade, San Francisco, trade paperback, 241 pp., $14.95, ISBN: 978-1-59780-094-5), a hearty new anthology from editors Ann and Jeff VanderMeer. The eighteen stories collected here, by such masters of the fantastic as Naomi Novik, Garth Nix, Howard Waldrop, Michael Moorcock, and Kage Baker, are all shipshape, and a good number of them are downright yar. Some are fantasies set in the golden age of piracy (though recent headlines from the waters around Somalia indicate that the best days of piracy may still lie ahead), while others are swashbuckling science fiction tales set on other worlds or in outer space itself.

2009. Thea has finally come into her own as an elemental mage and world weaver—not bad for a girl formerly lacking in magic. For the time being, she's still stuck at the Wandless Academy until she masters her abilities. Then she's called in to help with the mystery of a strange white cube, which leads into an epic quest that spans multiple worlds and times in order to restore the power of the greatest mage the world has ever known. Once again, she'll have to face off against the enigmatic Alphiri and the cunning Coyote, with more at stake than ever before. She'll need all of her wits and powers, as well as her friends, to solve this problem. With its unique blend of alternate history, oddball magic theory, memorable characters, and a fascinating plotline, *Cybermage* is a satisfying conclusion to the Worldweavers trilogy. I hope the author returns to this setting someday.

Chance Fortune in the Shadow Zone, by Shane Berryhill, Tor Starscape, October 2008. Thanks to a teleporter malfunction, fledging superhero Chance Fortune and his team, the Outlaws, are left stranded in the deadly Shadow Zone, their powers scrambled. Here, they have to deal with the legions of super villains exiled to the Zone in years past, as well as the mysterious, unstoppable Shadowmen and their ruthless leader, the Shadow Prince. When half of his team is kidnapped, Chance must lead the remnants on a rescue mission before the Shadow Prince succeeds in tearing open a hole between worlds. But which member of the Outlaws won't be going home? Berryhill makes some odd choices with this book, placing it in such an off-kilter setting and relegating half the team to the sidelines for much of the story, but it's still an intriguing, swift-moving story with plenty of adventure and a great deal of heart. I enjoyed it, and hope we'll see another installment soon.

Revealers, by Amanda Marrone, Simon Pulse, September 2008. By day, Jules and her friends are normal high school students. At night, they act as Revealers, witches who serve to police the supernatural community and destroy rogue vampires, werewolves, and demons. It's fun, if occasionally hazardous. As each member of the coven turns eighteen, they're inducted into the inner circle, but Jules, youngest of the lot, begins to suspect there's something going on, and far more to the coven than she ever expected. But can she stand up to centuries of tradition and the older generation, in order to do what's right? With an excellent setup and some brilliants twists, *Revealers* keeps from being dull or predictable. There's some forbidden romance, some hard moral choices, and plenty of supernatural action to make this a fun read all around.



The Crown of Zeus, by Christine Norris, Samhain Publishing, December 2008. When Megan Montgomery's family moves to England from New York, she's convinced she'll absolutely hate her new home, especially when she discovers they're to live in a huge, eerie countryside manor once owned by an eccentric archaeologist. To make friends, she invites several girls over for a weekend sleepover, during which they uncover a bizarre mystery involving a hidden library, and are transported into a magical semblance of Ancient Greece. There, they're thrust into a series of adventures, and sent on an epic quest for a lost artifact. Fast-paced and imaginative, this book has a great premise, one which allows for all sorts of interesting stories in future installments. ❧

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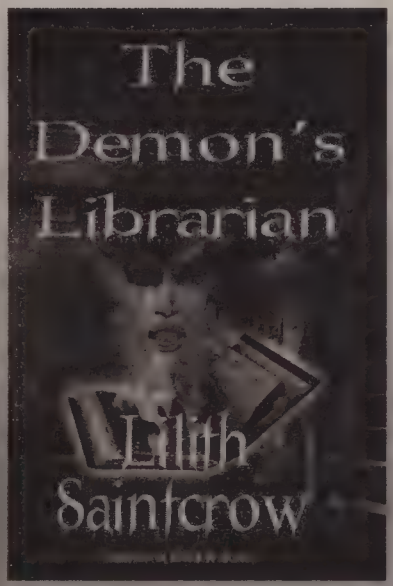

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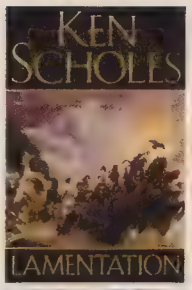
"Castor on Troubled Waters," by Rhys Hughes, is a shaggy pirate story that will have readers chuckling and groaning in equal measure; ideally, it should be read in a bar, with a mug of ale for company. Howard Waldrop's "Avast, Abaft!" is a zany mélange of nasty nautical archetypes, from Captain Hook to the Flying Dutchman, that delights with its inventiveness and delivers a surprisingly poignant punch. In "Skillet and Saber," Justin Howe focuses on that oft-overlooked but utterly necessary crewmember, the ship's cook, concocting a cook-off between rival pirate crews that is zestfully seasoned with murder and magic. Naomi Novik's contribution, "Armanita, or, The Wreck of the Amphidrake," sails in different seas from her bestselling *Temeraire* novels, but this adventure of a young noblewoman dispatched across the sea for a wedding that is very much against her will demonstrates that Novik minus dragons is still very good indeed. Mention should also be made of Elizabeth Bear and Sarah Monette's strong science fiction collaboration, "Boojum," in which a sentient pirate ship cannibalizes opposing crews, and Garth Nix's "Beyond the Sea Gate of the Scholar-Pirates of Sarsköe," a full-blooded fantasy featuring a centuries-old puppet magically endowed with the spirit and powers of a long-dead sorcerer; Nix's world, especially, could easily be elaborated upon at novel length.

Paul Witcover



Lamentation, Ken Scholes, Tor, New York, hardcover, 368 pp., $25.95, ISBN: 978-0-7653-2127-5.

A terrible act of destruction shakes the foundations of an already broken world in Ken Schole's *Lamentation*. Drawing equally from the Dying Earth and Steampunk subgenres yet not truly defined by either, *Lamentation* offers a world where magic and technology are not easily delineated and religious faith nurtures the near-extinct embers of both. Centuries after a magical plague destroyed the minds of almost an entire civilization, most of the sorcery and technological artifacts that survived the ancient world are held in safe keeping by the Androfrancine Order, a religious community of scholars and researchers. It is in the city of Windwir that the Brothers work to preserve that which is beneficial and to safeguard the world against that which could be used to destroy it. Not all appreciate the work of the Order: there are some who resent their monopoly of knowledge and the potential power that lays hidden within the Order's vaults. Others still covet the Order's wealth and influence and seek to control it from within, or at least destroy it and benefit from the power vacuum that its absence would leave among the nations of the Named Lands.

Neb, a young apprentice of the Androfrancines, is preparing to accompany his father, a full Brother, on an archaeological expedition when the city of Windwir disappears in a gust of wind and flame. Neb is the sole witness of the annihilation of the city. Wandering, struck dumb by shock and grief, he is taken prisoner by the forces of Sethbert, the decadent Overseer of the Three Rivers Delta. Neb learns that the Overseer has arranged the destruction of Windwir and is busy looting the ruins for artifacts, including most importantly the Order's steam-driven mechanical men whose memory banks hold much of the world's ancient knowledge. Sethbert's pride precludes him from keeping secret his role in the destruction of Windwir, and soon the truth reaches the ears of Rudolfo the Gipsy King, ruler of the Nine Forest Houses. As war foments among the people of the Named Lands, a schism threatens to develop among the survivors of the Androfrancine Order as two Popes stake a claim to its rule. Neb soon finds himself in the center of a struggle that will change the Named Lands forever, if it doesn't destroy them first.

Lamentation's potent combination of stealthy political machination, scenes of gritty man-to-man battle, believable characters, and uniquely postapocalyptic setting make this a must-purchase for anyone who appreciates fantasy and isn't afraid to straddle the boundaries of the genre.

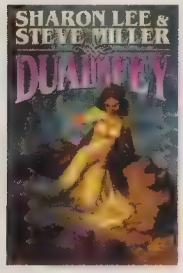
The Stormcaller, Tom Lloyd, Pyr Science Fiction & Fantasy, Amherst, NY, trade paperback, 486 pp., $15.00, ISBN: 978-1-59102-693-8.

A dream-haunted teenager is plucked from obscurity and fashioned into a weapon of fate in Tom Lloyd's heroic fantasy epic *The Stormcaller*. Born a "white-eye," more powerful than other humans, Isak prays for the day when he can leave his resentful normal father and their squalid life on a nomadic wagon train behind him. Before he is able to strike out on his own an enigmatic figure arrives with a message from the gods: Isak is to become the heir-elect to Lord Bahl, ruler of the tribe of Farlan, himself a white-eye. Isak finds his mentorship under Lord Bahl no easy task. The white-eyes, stronger and more charismatic than mere men, are natural leaders, but prone to violence and impatience. Meanwhile, political intrigue, the rumblings of the elven tribes and the manipulations of the gods threaten to overwhelm Bahl's reign, plunging Farlan into bloodshed and chaos and Isak into the center of it all. Lloyd depicts a living, breathing fantasy world full of fast action and high magic. Fans of R.A. Salvatore will find plenty to like in this tale of gods and men, wizards, elves and a downtrodden youth's rise to power. While the sheer number of players Lloyd introduces upon the stage

can become a bit overwhelming at first, Lloyd's ambitious creativity and storytelling talent quickly compensates. This first volume in what is planned as a multivolume epic lays the groundwork for what promises to be a sprawling tale of destiny and war. *The Stormcaller* is an auspicious first entry into the field of high fantasy and a sure sign of even greater things to come from this talented author.

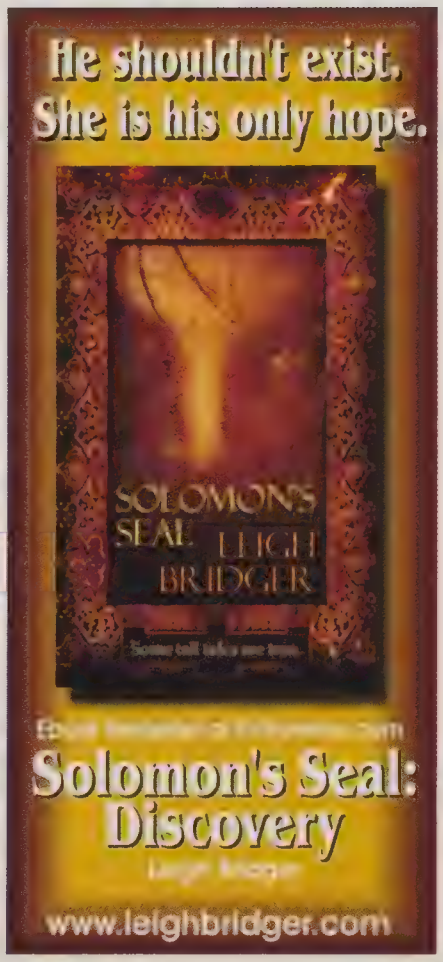
Duainfey, Sharon Lee & Steve Miller, BAEN, Riverdale, NY, hardcover, 318 pp., $24.00, ISBN: 978-1-4165-5552-0.

Sharon Lee and Steve Miller, a husband-and-wife writing team best known for their science fiction "Liaden" books, offer a tale of magic and romance in *Duainfey,* a novel set in a fantasy version of Regency England where the faerie realms share a boundary with the human realm. A youthful indiscretion left Rebecca Beauvelley with a crippled arm and an undeserved reputation as a woman of loose morals. Now a young lady, Rebecca's well-to-do family considers her "damaged goods" and an embarrassment, doting attention instead upon her beautiful but cruel younger sister Caroline. Her father, the Earl of Barimuir, is eager to see Rebecca out of his home so that the family may more fully focus their efforts upon finding a suitably prestigious husband for Caroline. He arranges to have Rebecca engaged to Sir Jennet Hale, an older widower looking for someone to manage his household. Despite her misgivings, Rebecca assents to the arrangement to avoid further shaming her family. During a dance at the family estate Sir Jennet proves himself to be boorish and cruel, leaving Rebecca vulnerable to the seductive powers of Altimere, a charming and handsome Elder Fey who is the guest of a family friend. Rebecca, unappreciated by her family and looking at the possibility of a loveless marriage to a terrible man, quickly assents to follow Altimere across the border into the magical realm of the Fey. Altimere is revealed to be a villain, an amoral and capricious monster whose plans for Rebecca are anything but gentle. He tricks Rebecca into slavery, forcing her into life as a concubine and an unwilling conduit for the transfer of Kest, the innate magical power that fuels all of the Fey realms. While Altimere plots to overthrow his Queen, Rebecca struggles to find a way out of her terrible predicament and back to her homelands.



Duainfey is billed as a work of dark romantic fantasy, and its scenes of explicit sexuality make it unsuitable for younger readers. However, adult readers will enjoy this erotic subversion of the "Prince Charming" leitmotif familiar from countless fairy tales.

Matt Staggs



Excuse me, but I've got to go feed the cats. Yes, of course I have cats. Really.

BY K.D. WENTWORTH
ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHANIE PUI-MUN LAW

Impractical Cats

On Tuesday, Thomas found Clarey in the living room of their elderly brick home, her white-haired head cocked as though listening to something. "The cats," she said from her accustomed seat in her threadbare brown recliner. "They want in."

He eased down onto the orange vinyl couch across from her, his joints aching. The old clock, a long-ago gift from their daughter, Marta, ticked to itself on the far wall, ten minutes slow as always. He needed to reset it again. "What cats?"

Her blue eyes, once so luminous, turned to Thomas, but he knew she didn't really see him anymore. It was as though lately her eyes saw only things from the past. That was all right, he thought. He'd been much better looking in those days.

"Our cats, silly," she said. "What other cats would I be talking about?"

They'd been married almost seventy-two years and, in all that time, they'd had a succession of dogs, mostly dachshunds, although the last, now dead three years, had been Pepper, an arthritic poodle. Clarey had never even fed a stray kitten at the back door.

"We don't have any cats," he said softly, his heart accelerating. She must have had another one of those damned TIAs, transischemic attacks, the doctor called them, a ministroke. Her medication, which cost over a hundred dollars a month, was supposed to prevent that. He got up and leaned down to hug her. She smelled of lemons from the slices in their iced tea at dinner. "Let's go to bed," he said, hoping she'd make more sense in the morning. Sometimes the TIAs passed without leaving much damage.

"Not until you let the cats in," she said against his shoulder, then pulled away to gaze up into his face.

"Hon, you know I can't," he said. "We don't have any cats. We don't even have Pepper anymore."

"Pepper's dead, silly," she said. "Are you getting senile?"

He levered her out of the worn chair, though pain jolted through both his knees. "I'll run you a hot bath," he said, smoothing her flyaway white hair. "That will make you feel better."

"I feel fine," she said, disentangling herself to fumble at the dead bolt, then throw open the front door. Torrid Oklahoma August air rushed in. Crickets were singing their night song outside and the wind was tossing the branches of the oak they'd planted over thirty years ago. Out in the darkness somewhere, a storm was brewing.

Clarey stood for a moment, a smile playing across her lined face. In the mellow lamplight, he could plainly see the seventeen-year-old girl who'd sneaked off without telling her parents to marry him so long ago.

"There," she said finally. "All in."

Thomas sighed. He couldn't bear it if she left him, either physically or mentally. Living in this world meant nothing without Clarey. He was certain that his lungs would not even be able to breathe if she wasn't with him. He edged around her, closed and locked the door. "About that bath," he said.

"Nag, nag, nag," she said affectionately. Together, they walked to the bedroom, her arm looped around his waist.

Thomas woke in the night to hear wind rushing over the roof. Thunder rumbled in the distance. Beside him, Clarey tossed in her sleep, murmuring. He eased out of bed and went into the kitchen to turn on the radio and listen for weather bulletins.

According to the announcer, the storm was tracking well off to the south. They wouldn't get the full brunt of it. He could go back to sleep.

"The cats miss you," Clarey said sleepily from the kitchen doorway. Her lacy nightgown was so worn, he couldn't see how it held together. But these days she steadfastly refused to wear anything newer, insisting the things he and the children bought now weren't hers. She reached for him. "Come back to bed."

"The cats?" he said, rising from the old table where they'd eaten so many meals over the years. His mother had suffered from senile dementia, crying out for her newborn baby in the nursing home on good days, and thinking she was in prison for killing her husband on bad ones. Thomas couldn't bear to think of Clarey experiencing such horrors. "Hon, there are no cats," he said, crossing to fold her frail form into his arms. "I think you must have dreamed them."

"We've always had cats," she said, fitting her head to the comfortable hollow of his shoulder. "I just couldn't see them before."

Dear God, don't do this to her, Thomas thought, clutching her close as though he could protect her, when in reality he knew from bitter experience that what would come, would come, regardless of prayers or wishes. "Let's go back to bed," he said. "Maybe I'll dream of them too."

"I hope so," she said sleepily, leaning against him as they passed the laundry room. "They're good cats. You'll like them."

In the morning, when he emerged from the shower, he found two small bowls of tuna and milk on the kitchen floor. Clarey was at the stove, cooking bacon with a smile. The slices were already black, well past being merely crisp.

He sidestepped the bowls and eased the skillet off the burner. Her excellent home cooking was one of the skills that had vanished several TIAs back. "Smells—delicious," he said. "What are the bowls for?"

"The cats, silly," she said and opened the refrigerator.

That was several days' worth of lunches ruined, he thought numbly. Prices just kept rising, while the cost-of-living adjustments on their retirement and Social Security were almighty slow to come.

"The—cats—are used to getting their own breakfast," he said, picking up one of the bowls and setting it on the counter. Milk lapped over the rim and dribbled down the cabinet door. He sighed. "You don't want to spoil their appetites for mice."

"Oh, they're great hunters," she said, placing the burnt bacon on a paper towel to drain. "One of them brought me a star last night after you went back to sleep. It fizzed just like those sparklers we used to buy for the Fourth of July. I almost woke you up to see it."

"Really?" he said. "How—interesting." Maybe they should get a dog again, he thought, something live and soft and warm to take her mind off imaginary cats. When poor Pepper had died, he'd been afraid they were too old to raise a puppy, one likely to outlive them. But they could go to the shelter for a dog that needed a home, maybe one that was older.

After breakfast, he would call their granddaughter, Laney, and ask if she had time to give them a ride out to the north side of town.

When he wasn't looking, Clarey set the bowl back on the floor. Later, when he helped her clear the table, both bowls were empty.

Thomas was in the bedroom, staring in dismay at his formerly white undershirts which had come out of the dryer pale blue. Laundry sorting was another skill that had disappeared sometime in the last year. He heard the doorbell ring and abandoned the discolored clothing. hoping to head Clarey off from the front door.

"I'm sorry, dear, but I don't think I know you," Clarey was saying to their granddaughter, Laney, who had Clarey's clear blue eyes and tendency toward pudginess, but his height. A grown woman, she was raising young children of her own and came faithfully every week to take her grandparents to church and grocery shopping.

"Now, Gran!" Laney smiled sadly as she stepped inside. "You're always saying that and you know it's not true." She kissed her grandmother on the cheek.

Clarey's face clouded as she flinched back. Her eyes brimmed with tears and she turned to Thomas, afraid, groping for understanding.

"It's Laney," he said, putting a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Marta's little girl. You were the first to hold her just after she was born, even before her dad arrived at the hospital."

"Oh, Laney!" Clarey threw her arms around her granddaughter. "Child, where have you been? I've missed you so!"

"Taking care of my boys," Laney said. "They're as much of a handful as ever, but, having brought up two kids of your own, I expect you know all about that."

Thomas reached into his pocket, then passed Laney the keys to his LTD.

"Are we going somewhere?" Clarey said.

"Grandpa?" Laney tucked a lock of flyaway brown hair behind her

ear, obviously afraid to say the wrong thing and upset her grandmother all over again.

"It's a surprise," he said lightly and took Clarey's hand. "You'll see." He grabbed his gray fedora off the peg next to the door.

They all piled into the car, then Laney drove their elderly tan Ford across town with grim determination, complaining, as always, that the gear shift indicator no longer worked and the turn signal was cranky. But, even though his eyesight was too poor to drive himself now, Thomas still liked going places in his own car. It preserved at least the faint illusion of independence.

The animal shelter was far out on the edge of town, past industrial parks and railroad tracks and neighborhoods filled with rundown mobile homes. They could hear demoralized barking even in the parking lot when they pulled up to the low cinder block building. Clarey gazed through the car window, her fingers splayed against the glass. "What's this?"

"We're here to pick out a dog," he said, opening his door. The hot August air rushed in and sweat immediately broke out on his forehead. "There are so many poor creatures who need homes, it seems selfish not to adopt one."

"Thomas, you know we can't have a dog," Clarey said gravely, remaining in the front seat. Her tone was disappointed as though he were a dim-witted two-year-old getting into the cake frosting. Her faded blue eyes gazed regretfully at the graceless building. "The cats wouldn't like it."

"There are no—" He bit the words off. Laney raised an eyebrow, but he couldn't explain in front of her grandmother. "They're outside cats," he said desperately. "This will be an inside dog." He clasped Clarey's hand and helped her out of the car.

"When you did get cats?" Laney said, locking the LTD's doors.

"Oh, they've always been there," Clarey said, patting her granddaughter's cheek. "I just couldn't see them before."

Understanding bloomed in Laney's eyes. She met his gaze for a moment, then took her grandmother's arm with determined cheerfulness. "What kind of dog do you want—another poodle, or a dachshund, or just an out and out mutt? Maybe we can find a poodle-dachshund mix and then you can have both at the same time."

"I'm sure they're all quite lovely, but we're not getting a dog," Clarey said. "You two go in and have a look if you want, though. I'll just sit on this nice bench here under the tree and wait for you. The cats will keep me company."

Thomas stared at her helplessly. There was no convincing her to do anything that contradicted her delusions these days. "Stay here with your grandmother," he said to Laney. "It's shady and I won't be too long." The barking within grew more frenzied as though the doomed denizens knew he was coming.

"Grandpa, are you sure about this?" Laney sank onto the wooden bench beside Clarey, clinking the car keys nervously from one hand to the other.

"The cats are taking over," he said in a low whisper, then pulled off his old fedora. The afternoon sun poured down on his balding head. "We're dog people, always have been."

She nodded and he went inside the concrete block building to tour row after row of chain-link enclosures. There were pocket-sized yappy dogs and large lumbering ones, Shepherd-mixes, hounds, and pit bulls, some pacing, others curled into a forlorn ball, most gazing up at him as he passed as though he were their savior. He found not a single dachshund or poodle, but there was a small quivering salt-and-pepper colored poodle-schnauzer mix.

"She's an older dog," the attendant, a sandy-haired youngster, said, "probably six or seven, real sweet-natured, and of course they get their shots as soon as they arrive." The boy knelt and offered the curly coated dog a finger through the wire. The little female sniffed it hopefully, then gave a faint wag of her tail. He sighed. "Today's her last day, poor thing."

He was in a hotel with bright chandeliers shining down on fancy green and gold chairs and couches. All the rooms were occupied by cats, big ones, small ones, Siamese and tabbies, calicos and scarred gray toms

So Thomas filled out the paperwork, paid the fee, and returned to the parking lot with a wriggling armful of dog to show Clarey their new pet.

Clarey reacted with dismay, refusing even to touch the pitiful beast. Thomas sat in the back seat and held the trembling dog in his lap as Laney drove them to the grocery to buy dog food, treats, and a collar. The little female's fur was silken under his fingers, though she badly needed a bath. Her brown eyes glanced from time to time out the window, but mostly the dog just huddled against him.

"What are you going to name her?" Laney asked over her shoulder later as she turned down their tree-lined street.

"I thought I would let your grandmother name her," he said, stroking the dog's head.

Clarey, who had loved dogs all her life, sighed from the front seat. "I'm afraid she won't be with us long enough to name."

After Laney garaged their old car and went home to her sons, Clarey retreated to the bedroom for an afternoon nap. The moment Thomas put the anxious dog down, she scuttled into a kitchen corner, toenails clicking, and then stared up at him with miserable dark eyes. He eased down onto the blue-flowered tile and sat with her, joints protesting, equally as lost himself.

"Tilly," he murmured to the poor ignored creature, thinking of a long-lost childhood friend who had always been up for an adventure. "We'll call you Tilly." He eased the dog's warm weight into his lap, then stroked her long soft ears until she relaxed.

He rested his head back against the pantry door. "Clarey will come around," he said. "You'll see. A live dog has to be better than a hundred imaginary cats."

Things did not improve, though, when Clarey got up. She ignored the dog, but conversed with the nonexistent cats. There seemed to be four of the blasted things now, and they had apparently acquired names: Shadow and Flit, Dasher and Firetoes.

Thomas helped his wife with dinner, prompting her when she couldn't remember how to grill hot dogs or microwave the frozen corn, all the time trying to get her to speculate with him about when Alys, Robert's granddaughter, their newest great-granddaughter, would take her first steps.

"Dasher had kittens last year," Clarey said instead, disregarding his attempts to talk about family. "I would have loved to see them. They must have been so cute!"

Imaginary cats having imaginary kittens, he thought morosely. "I'm taking Tilly outside for a few minutes," he said finally as the hot dogs sizzled.

She didn't turn around. "Tilly?"

"Our new dog," he said.

"Oh, we don't have a dog," Clarey said, then kissed his cheek. "Silly."

The cowering dog wouldn't come to him, so he had to pick her up and carry her outside. Even though the temperature was in the high nineties, she seemed happier in their spacious back yard and stirred herself to trot about a bit, sniffing along the chain-link fence. When he tried to call her back in, though, she wedged herself under a forsythia bush, then stared at him with tragic brown eyes as though that house ate dogs and he should very well know it. "All right," he said after several minutes of unsuccessful coaxing. "Stay out here for now."

He went back in and helped Clarey set the table. Four bowls of tuna and milk were already down on the floor and he had to maneuver around them. "I thought we were going to let the cats hunt for their own dinner," he said.

"They can't eat stars, dear," she said.

"They can eat mice," he said stiffly, then slid into his seat across from her. The old oak chair creaked beneath his weight. Everything in the house was falling apart, he told himself, including him.

"Oh, they're far too important to eat mice," she said. "They hunt more interesting things."

Great, he thought, cutting into a charred hot dog. Imaginary cats were going to eat them out of house and home.

He was just about finished with his dinner when he felt the silken brush of fur against his ankle. His heart hammered as he glanced under the table. Had the dog somehow got in?

She had not, but the four bowls were empty.

As he was falling asleep that night, after he'd settled Tilly in their last dog's old basket with a tattered blanket, Thomas felt a small warm body snuggling against his legs. He sat up, thinking Tilly was on the bed. The presence jumped away. He heard pattering feet on the floor as his heart pounded. He switched the light on. "Tilly?"

The wicker basket over by the closet was empty. He got up and eventually found the dog in a kitchen corner, back pressed to the wall, trembling. "Did I scare you?" he said softly. "I'm sorry." He bent to scoop her up, then carried her back into the bedroom and deposited her in the dog bed. "Stay," he said. "In this house, dogs don't sleep on the people bed."

Under the covers, Clarey turned over, blinking at him sleepily in the lamplight. "It wasn't her, silly. It was one of the cats."

"There are no—" he said, cutting himself off. Arguing about a delusion was pointless. And it wasn't her fault. He knew that. Sometimes, though, it just seemed like she could try harder to fight her way through the fog and stay in the real world where he had to live.

"They scatter the stars at twilight. And chase the moon through the sky. Do you know that silly thing is so lazy, it would just stay in the same place night after night if no one made it behave properly?"

She smiled, then closed her eyes. Her white hair framed her face like cotton in the dim light. "You'll see."

He got back into bed, turned off the lamp, and drifted to sleep.

He was in a hotel with bright chandeliers shining down on fancy green and gold chairs and couches. All the rooms were occupied by cats, big ones, small ones, Siamese and tabbies, calicos and scarred gray toms. "Aren't there any rooms for people?" he asked the bored desk clerk, who seemed to be a tiger.

The clerk opened his mouth and roared so loud, Thomas fell backward. He woke up with a start, heart once again racing. He reached down. Something warm and solid was on top of the covers, nestled against his legs again. He snapped on the light, preparing to seize Tilly's collar and escort her back to her bed again. Across the room, though, he could see the dog in her basket, head down, ears flattened, curled into a tight ball.

What in—? He reached for whatever was in the bed, felt unseen fur, then recoiled as whatever-it-was jumped off the bed and padded away.

"Keep that up," Clarey murmured without opening her eyes, "and Driftfoot will think you don't like him."

This was a dream, he thought numbly. It had to be, the same kind of dream Clarey kept having which made her see cats where there were none.

Of course, he wasn't exactly seeing cats, he thought grimly. Just feeling them. And hearing their paws skitter across the floor. That wasn't as bad, was it? Surely TIAs weren't catching. Unnerved, he went into the living room, carrying Tilly, who was most decidedly real, and spent the rest of the night in his ratty old green recliner.

In the morning, Clarey had already filled five bowls before he stumbled into the kitchen. Another new cat, he thought gloomily. At this rate, they'd max out the bowls before the end of the week and have to shop for new dishes.

"We're out of milk," she said as he stretched, full of kinks from sleeping in a blasted chair.

"What a surprise," he said bleakly, then opened the back door and shooed Tilly out. She launched herself off the porch with a growl as though she'd seen a squirrel.

"You don't need it with your coffee anyway," Clarey said, giving him a plate of "toast" that she'd forgotten to run through the toaster. "You always drank it black when we first got married."

"I did a lot of things different then," he said, sitting at the table and staring down at the soft pale bread. "So did you."

"It's better now," she said, sitting across from him and pouring a bowl of corn flakes she'd have to eat dry. "I can see them. Think of the little darlings being with us all those years and me never noticing!"

Last Sunday, their son, Robert, had been by the house to visit after church and counseled his father to send Clarey to the Assisted Living center a few miles away. "She's getting worse," Robert said. "You know it and I know it. She's like a two-year-old who can't be left alone. One of these days you'll lose track of her for a few minutes and she'll burn the house down."

"Never!" Thomas said. His face felt hot. "I'd die to keep her safe."

"That wouldn't help." Robert, who had the heavy, uncompromising brow of Thomas's father, shook his head. He was a corporation lawyer and saw things in crisp black and white. As far as Robert was concerned, every problem had one and only one correct solution. Proprieties must be observed. All I's dotted, T's crossed. The possibility did not exist that he might ever be wrong.

"She's staying here with me," Thomas said. And that had been the end of it, at least for the moment. But that had also been before the blasted cats arrived.

He stood up and almost slipped in a patch of water on the tiled floor. "What—?"

Clarey smiled fondly, and in that moment her face looked young

and smooth again. "Flit brought me a bit of moonlight," she said. "I should have put it in the freezer so that you could see it, too. I had no idea it would melt so fast."

"Moonlight," he said, then reached for a dish rag to wipe up the mess.

"Yes, clever, clever kitty," she said. "Who would have thought that cats could be so much fun? I wished I'd noticed them years ago."

Later that day, in the full-blast heat of the afternoon, Laney dropped by their house on her way to pick up the boys at school, bringing them a gallon of milk from the convenience store. Thomas heard her car and went out to meet her on the porch. "What's up?" she said. "Usually a half gallon lasts you all week."

"It's the cats," he said grimly.

"Yes, I saw one just as I drove up," she said. "A beautiful calico, half again as big as most house cats. I was really surprised because I thought Gran was making them up."

Several sparrows burst out of the holly below the porch, as though something had frightened them. "She is," he said.

"Well, that one was real," she said, "and it was sitting on your porch swing, washing its back, making itself quite at home."

"It must belong to someone else in the neighborhood," he said. "We don't have even one cat, much less five!"

Her eyes filled with tears. "Grandpa, it'll be all right." She put the sack down and threw her arms around him, hugging him close. "Gran will get over it. She always does. Remember that time she had a TIA and couldn't even say 'napkins?' She called them 'square plates' for weeks, but now she's fine."

That time, Clarey had gotten most of her lost words back, he thought numbly. Maybe this would be the same. She'd wake up one morning and the "cats" would be gone. He'd just have to wait it out. "Yes, you're right," he said into Laney's citrus-scented brown hair. "I'm letting it upset me more than I should."

By Sunday, they were out of milk again. Each morning and night, Clarey filled the five bowls on the floor and somehow later the bowls were always empty. He tried leaving the dog outside all morning, certain that she must be consuming the invisible cats' food, but the milk disappeared just the same. Then he watched Clarey, because she had to be pouring out the milk when he wasn't looking. But though he watched as she brushed her teeth, showered, dressed, and combed her hair without once going near the kitchen, the milk went away.

Sometimes, he thought he heard them, mewing and purring, padding around the house, jumping from couch to chair to coffee table. Clarey let them in and out on a regular basis. And, when they were supposedly "in," the dog would not come back into the house unless he caught her, then carried her inside. Even so, she wriggled and fought to escape, and once imprisoned in the house, cowered in a corner.

Laney and her boys came over to take them to church as usual, and then afterward, out to Charlie's for fried chicken, their favorite. On the way, Clarey chatted about the five cats with her great-grandsons, Zack and Ryan, until the boys were all for going back to the house and playing with them after lunch.

"Oh, no," Clarey said solemnly as they settled at a table in the corner. "They're not that kind of cat at all. They don't chase balls and yarn or roll in catnip. They have much more important things to do."

Laney passed out fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy, biscuits, and fried okra, and they all started with their meals. "Like what?" eight-year-old Zack asked a few minutes later, forgetting to swallow his mouthful of potatoes first.

"They scatter the stars at twilight," Clarey said, looking up from her fried okra. Her blue eyes were focused on something far away. "And chase the moon through the sky. Do you know that silly thing is so lazy, it would just stay in the same place night after night if no one made it behave properly?"

Zack's eyebrows rose, but his ten-year-old brother, Ryan, looked dubious. "Great-Gran," he said, "the moon revolves around the Earth on its own. We learned about it at school."

"Oh, the moon is not very clever," Clarey said, pulling her steaming biscuit apart and reaching for the honey. "The cats have to make sure it does what it's supposed to, otherwise every night would be the same and wouldn't that be boring?"

Laney gave her son a warning look. "Interesting sermon today, wasn't it, Grandpa?"

Thomas, who hadn't paid the least attention to the minister, nodded. His fried chicken tasted like wax paper.

Laney dropped them off and then Clarey went into the bedroom for her nap. Thomas dropped heavily into his easy chair and turned the TV on, but left the sound muted. The Dallas Cowboys, his favorite team, were playing, but he just couldn't keep his mind on the game. Instead, his thoughts chased each other round and round. The cat problem showed no sign of resolving itself and Clarey grew more out of touch with reality every day. She was getting worse. He didn't know what to do.

At some point, he must have dozed off, because a knock at the door woke him. "Dad?" a voice said out on the porch.

It was Robert. "Coming," he said, heaving out of the ratty old recliner. He opened the door and saw his son holding something against his chest. "I wasn't expecting you so early," he said, standing aside so Robert could enter.

"Early?" Robert settled on the couch. His ice-blue short-sleeved shirt was crisply ironed and even his jeans had a precise crease. "It's three. That's when I always come."

"Well, I was just resting my eyes," Thomas mumbled. He looked toward the kitchen, wondering if Clarey was up. He didn't like to think of her wandering the house unsupervised.

Robert shifted something in his lap, but without the light on, Thomas couldn't tell what it was. "What have you got there?" he asked.

"One of your cats, I guess," Robert said. "It was on the porch and I heard you and Mom had a bunch these days."

"Imaginary cats," Thomas said. "Not real ones." He squinted, but still couldn't make out an animal. He switched on the lamp beside his chair. Robert seemed to stroking—empty air. "That's not funny!"

"Don't blow a gasket," Robert said. "If it's not yours, I'll just put it back outside."

Thomas lurched to his feet. "There is no cat!"

Brow furrowed, Robert glanced down at his hands. "Can't you see it?"

"You know danged well that I can't!"

Reaching across the coffee table, Robert took his trembling hand and then guided it back to the invisible beast. Thomas felt a smooth furry back, the vibration of purring, ears and a sleek cat skull. With a cry, he snatched his hand back and cradled it to his chest.

"Dad, you probably just need new glasses," Robert said. "It's not the end of the world."

"Oh, there you are!" Clarey's voice came from the kitchen. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

Robert rose and she came to him, giving him a peck on the cheek, then took the invisible cat in her own arms. "Naughty Dasher," she said. "I've been so worried. I thought the wind blew you away."

"What—color is it?" Thomas asked his son. His heart was hammering.

"Black with a white blaze on its face," Robert said. "Come out into the sunlight. You'll be able to see it better."

"I can't see what isn't there," he said stiffly, afraid that maybe he would see it and what would happen then? Instead, he went into the back yard to look for Tilly.

She was trembling in the far corner, behind the white Rose of Sharon bush he'd given Clarey for their anniversary ten years ago. The cicadas droned on and on as he plopped down in the grass and held the frightened dog in his lap until they'd both stopped shaking.

Robert left before Thomas worked up the nerve to go back inside. Apparently, everyone was seeing cats but him. Did that mean he was the crazy one?

The five bowls were down, full of milk, on the tiled floor. Clarey stood at the counter, microwaving frozen pot pies, which were sure to be either thoroughly nuked or glacier-cold when she was done with them. Thomas cleared his throat. "I thought we were out of milk."

She gave him that familiar sweet smile over her shoulder, the one that made him ache for all the years and opportunities gone by, the good times that would never come again. It was like she was leaving him behind and going somewhere he could not follow.

"Robert went down to the convenience store for me," she said. "He bought some tuna too. The dear creatures do love their fish."

"Yes," he said, gazing out the window at poor Tilly who had adamantly refused to come back inside with him. He didn't blame her. Living in the backyard was looking more attractive all the time. "I'm sure they do," he said.

Something soft brushed against his ankles. He shuddered, but refused to look down. "There are no—cats," he said like a failed mantra, his throat constricted.

Clarey crossed the kitchen and pulled him into her arms. "I know you can't see them yet," she said, rubbing the back of his neck, "but they say that's okay. You will when it's time."

"Think, Clarey!" he said, flooded with desperation. "You can beat this if you try. Cats don't chase the moon across the sky. They don't scatter the blasted stars. Even your ten-year-old great-grandson knows better than that."

For a moment, her face contorted as though she were unhappy, then the microwave dinged. "We'll go out and sit on the porch after dinner," she said. "Firetoes told me a storm is coming. We can watch them play with the lightning. You'll like that."

He released her. "Sure thing," he said, though no storms had been forecast in the weather report that morning. He set the table while she filled the water glasses and then brought over the pot pies. The crusts were burned to leather.

After dinner, Thomas finally was able to coax Tilly inside and feed her. "I guess the cats must have gone out," he said to himself as the little dog bolted down her canned dog food.

Then he and Clarey went out onto the front porch and sat hand in hand on the old swing that needed repainting again. As always, her warm touch steadied him and he felt the echo of all the times down through the years that they had taken their troubles outside and sat together just so. The August sun still blazed, but a dark billowing cloud with the tell-tale anvil shape had popped up in the west. Such clouds often did presage thunderstorms. How had Clarey known?

"It does look like a storm," he said.

She leaned her head against his shoulder. He remembered how she hadn't even told her mother they were getting married, all those years ago, had just said yes and sneaked off with him to the Justice of the Peace, and she had loved her mother dearly. She had simply loved him more.

"I never understood why you married me so quick," he said. "You could have had a dozen other fellows, all better looking and with better prospects."

"The first time you said my name," she said, eyes on the approaching storm, "our whole life flashed through my head. I knew that one day we would sit here like this, with children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, that it would all have been worth it."

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Clarey waved to something that wasn't there. The breeze gusted, deliciously cooler than the heavy August air that had blanketed the city for days now. It carried the sweet scent of rain.

"Flit is chasing the winds here for us," she said. "I told him it was too hot."

"Maybe we should go inside," he said as the cloud obscured the sun, but the cool air felt good against his face. A few houses down the street, someone was mowing and he could smell the pungency of cut grass. It made him think of lazy summer afternoons back when staid Robert had still been their young and eager Bobby. The two of them had often worked on the car together, dug weeds out of the garden, passed a football back and forth.

Those days are gone, he thought morosely, and now even Clarey was slipping away from him. Admitting that to himself stole the very air from his lungs.

Thunder sounded again, this time more of a crack than a rumble and much closer. Wind swirled through the branches of the oak in the front yard so that the leaves fluttered. Gray flashed in midair just above the porch rail. The swing rocked back as Clarey opened her arms to catch something, then bent her head over it.

"Shadow-cat," she murmured. "Where have you been?"

"There is no blasted cat!" he said, though he could hear purring. His pulse raced. He must be losing his mind too.

"Shadow says not to be afraid," she said and pressed her cheek against the invisible fur.

He bolted to his feet, wincing at the sharp pain in his knees. "Afraid of what?"

"They're just playing," Clarey said. She rose and tottered down the steps into the front yard.

The storm was getting closer. The sun was totally occluded now, so that the light had turned an unsettling gray-green and jagged bolts streaked through the clouds, intersecting one another like strands in a bright spiderweb. The storm was coming in way too fast. "We'd better go inside and check the weather bulletins," he said. "This looks like a bad thunderstorm cell. We might have to take cover."

"Just look at them up there!" Clarey said, her head tilted toward the darkening sky. "Dancing with the lightning like that and never once getting burned! Clever cats!"

"We'll watch from inside," he said, hurrying down the steps after her. He took her arm, but she pulled away. "Clarey, please!"

"It's all right," she said. "The cats say so."

He reached for her again, but something unseen raked his arm with sharp, sharp claws. He flinched back and saw blood well up in long parallel scratches.

"You scared him," Clarey said, then her arms seemed suddenly empty. She folded them across her chest. "Shadow-cat didn't mean to do that."

The top of the oak was bent double now as the wind blasted out of the west. "Never mind!" he shouted above the noise. "Just come inside!"

"But they chased the storm here for us," she said and took his hand. "The least we can do is stay outside and enjoy it."

Chill raindrops pattered down, mixing with the blood on his arm. He pulled her toward the porch and she trailed after him, gazing up at the clouds like a reluctant child called in too soon from playing with friends. Lightning flashed, so bright he could feel it in his bones, and the thunder followed half a breath later. The air smelled of scorched iron. It was so close now. They had to get in the house!

Just when Thomas had her almost at the top of the steps, Clarey slipped his grip and returned to the yard, stopping under the oak. "No!" he cried. "Not under the tree in all this lightning!"

The rain increased, coming down in sheets now. He went back after her, but slipped on the last step and sprawled full length in the

wet grass. A small cool nose bumped his face. The rain was shearing around something so that he could make out a catlike shape.

"I—I thought cats didn't like r-rain," he gasped. His right knee was throbbing. He must have twisted it. He dug his fingers into the mud, trying to rise.

Clarey bent over him. "These are not ordinary cats," she said over the hiss of rain striking the driveway and house. Her white hair straggled soddenly about her face, but she'd never looked lovelier, even as rain dripped off her nose. "Surely you know that by now?"

He could almost see them. Flashes of white and gray and black and calico wove through the rain, too quickly for living flesh. Then lightning struck a birch across the street. He closed his eyes, but the brightness seared through his brain.

Clarey clapped her hands as though it were a fireworks display just for her.

"Clarey!" Thomas said, trying to blink away the afterimage. "We have to go inside!"

"I want to dance too," she said.

He struggled up, but the knee was very bad. He hobbled after her, the pain of each step stealing his breath away. "Clarey!" His voice was only a croak.

She looked so young, throwing her arms out in the driving rain, twirling, dancing as she had on the night of their wedding. And the cats, they were there too, larger than life, every color a cat might be, their fur crawling with sparks. Tails high, two of them turned to him. Their eyes were stars.

Lightning cracked again, this time simultaneous with the thunder. The night seemed to split and then it wasn't raining anymore. The

And the cats, they were there too, larger than life, every color a cat might be, their fur crawling with sparks. Tails high, two of them turned to him. Their eyes were stars.

cats looked at him with their brilliant gaze. One held something shining in its mouth.

"Another star, Dasher!" Clarey reached out and took the glowing object. "Oh, how lovely!" It fizzed in her hands like a firecracker about to explode.

He could still see the house and the tree and the neighborhood behind them, but in the distance, as though the two of them had somehow traveled. Thunder rumbled, farther away now. The storm seemed to have moved beyond, too. "I don't understand," Thomas said, trying his knee. It didn't hurt.

"It's a gift, silly," Clarey said, holding out the star. It was pure white one second and then blazing with color the next, alternating back and forth, a handful of sizzling opaline fire.

"What happened to the rain?" he said, afraid to touch the so-called "star." Tentatively, he put more weight on his bad knee and it held.

"The rain is still there," Clarey said. In the starlight, her face was smooth again, young and carefree. "It's just that we aren't." She took his hand and eased the star into his reluctant fingers.

The piece of living light was warm, so very warm. The goodness of it flooded into him, the strength, heating him all the way through. It radiated a sweetness that it seemed he'd been waiting all his life to taste. For a dizzying moment, he felt as though he could go anywhere, do anything.

An immense black cat with a jagged white blaze on its face leaped down from—somewhere. It held another glimmering star in its mouth like an errant mouse. Clarey accepted it as more cats appeared out of the darkness to rub up against her legs.

"Such smart cats," she said, tucking the star into her hair. "I'm sure I could never catch anything as amazing as a moonbeam or a bit of wind, no matter how hard I tried."

Thunder cracked, close again, making him jump. Was the storm coming back? He gazed around at the strange silent darkness, worried that they'd gotten too far from home. "We have to get inside!"

"No, dear, I'm not going back." Clarey gazed fondly down at the milling cats as though they were her children. "That would be no way to repay such lovely gifts." She smiled. "You go, though, if you feel you must. You can catch up with me later."

He looked back at their house, far away and small, now cold and dark under the assault of the storm, battered by the winds, drowned in the downpour. This was crazy. They should go in where it was safe, turn on the lights, dry off, and listen to the weather bulletin so they'd know what was coming and could prepare. They'd raised Marta and Robert in that house. It held everything they owned, all their mementos and photographs, the accumulation of a lifetime. They couldn't just turn their backs and walk away.

For a second, he felt the cold rain needling his face again, the fierce pain in his wrenched knee, wet grass pressing against his cheek, smelled the wet-iron reek of ozone from the lightning strike across the street. Like a magnet, the empty house pulled at him, urging that they take up their lives again and go on with the daily struggle the best they could: Burnt food. Forgotten names. Ruined laundry. A deteriorating car they couldn't even drive, and no doubt a move to the nursing home for Clarey in the very near future.

But poor as it was, that was all they had, he thought, or at least all that remained to them. If they gave that up, they would have nothing.

Just ahead of him, where the street should have been, the cats were racing back and forth in velvet blackness, pouncing on sparkles in the shapes of constellations and shimmering flickers that looked like shooting stars. Their ears were eager, their tales high with excitement. Clarey watched, laughing like a young girl. Illuminated by the star she held, her hair seemed dark chestnut again, her eyes perceptive as they had not been in such a long time.

Then he thought he heard the phone ringing and turned back, heart racing. Distantly, he could feel cold rain soak his shirt and trousers, tasted the bitterness of chill mud on his lips. He took a step toward the house. Their daughter, Marta, might be calling, worried about them in this storm, or Laney, or even Robert. He and Clarey should go in, reassure the caller that they were all right, then lock the doors and huddle together as they always had until it was safe again. No storm lasted forever.

But— He stared at the darkened windows, clutching the star. If he went now, he would be alone. The enormity of that rocked him. Clarey refused to go back and it was beyond him to force her, so that meant—

His heart raced. That meant he didn't live there anymore either. Because, ever since that night so long ago, when she'd forsaken her beloved family to go fearlessly into the future with him, his home was with Clarey, whatever she did, wherever she went. Now it was his turn to cast all logic aside and follow her.

Turning away, he eased through the cats with their bright knowing eyes and laced his fingers through Clarey's, holding tight to the glimmering star with his other hand. She threw her arms around him, warm and alive, and together they danced to the bright sharp music of the lightning all the way up into the star-studded sky. ❧

You might expect this to be a certain kind of tale, and in part you'll be right. But in a much larger part, you couldn't be more wrong. Enjoy!

Sails Above Greensea

BY ADAM CORBIN FUSCO
ILLUSTRATION BY KURT HUGGINS AND ZELDA DEVON

Her hair was a rich red-brown, carved from oakheart rescued from sunken Jodhpur, and it hung straight down, lest she portray the ship as fighting against the wind. Seams running down her cheeks made her look as if crying. Her gown was fashioned with enough folds and skirls to rival the woodcraft of Calabreese, and it clung to her, revealing an ample bosom and narrow hips. She was beautiful. The legend said that she was made in the likeness of the fifteenth wife of the First and Last Pyrate King—or was the wife herself, turned to wood after gazing into the baleful eyes of Leviathan.

The battle had taken its toll. The figurehead's delicate hands, which held a crimson orb, had been destroyed by cannon fire. Her outstretched arms now ended in splinters and her body listed to larboard, the impact having cracked some of the fastenings.

Captain Monteroy Absinthe leaned over the railing and tried to keep the concern out of his voice. "Can she be saved, Chips?"

The carpenter, hammer in hand, swung on a plank at the prow of the ship. "She's a might loose in the waist, sar," he said, grinning as he took hold of the figure and rocked it back and forth. "A good nailin' will do her."

"I'm sure your wood is sufficient for the job," Absinthe said. "In the meantime, secure her square to the ship."

When Chips laughed, it sounded like a rattling bag of seapebbles, for all the greenweed he smoked. He reached behind the figure and loosened some remaining fragments of a broken nail. Bits of wood floated away and disappeared from sight long before they hit Ocean, hundreds of fathoms of air below.

"And the hands and orb?" Absinthe asked. The lady was to hold the moon Andaluse, the very namesake of the ship. As word of its loss traveled belowdecks, to sections such as Osterlich and Gambolding and Peasepool, and in days' time even to the Bottoms, the talk would be of how a search for the treasure and crown of the First and Last was nothing but a mad venture from an untried captain, and the signs had told it so.

Chips inspected the stubs of the figurehead's arms. "Oh, aye, Cap'n, I can carve new ones," he said. "But it needs oakheart. We ain't got oakheart." As the ship maneuvered closer to the Spire, a shallow gust heeled her to larboard and sent Chips slamming into the body of the lady. He pushed himself away, each hand landing on a breast. "Least her other two orbs be intact, sar!"

Absinthe smiled, even as he felt his heart sink. He would hear it from the crew, about how the carpenter was more sorely needed elsewhere than on repair duty on the figurehead. The fore-foremast was splintered and needed replacing, the iron-bound door of the forecastle had been staved, starboard gingerbread had been peppered for a cable length, and more reports of damage were trickling in from decks such as Lamplight and Cooper Row. But he would not jeopardize the luck of the men, however much he favored the crow feather in his hat or the red scarf he tied about his neck like a noose. The crew needed to see the lady intact. Besides, he needed time to interview the sea rats that were just now being rescued from the Spire.

"Leave off the hands, then," he said. "Just make sure she doesn't fall to Harrowdeep. I need the lady in sailing shape as soon as possible."

"Oh, aye, Cap'n," said Chips, preparing to hammer in a nail behind the figurehead's rump. "But she weren't no lady, if the legend be true. 'Twas a whore, by trade."

"All the more reason to inspire the men."

The attack had not lasted long. The sun, in fact, was still barely past rising. The waves of Ocean, tiny with distance as Absinthe gazed down, winkled like thousands of gold coins flung across an emerald flag. As he straightened and looked to starboard, his eyes fell upon the Spire. He could not help but be in awe of it, though it wasn't its towering height that interested him now.

The Spire was the top of a mountain once, so it was said, before Leviathan began to devour the land, and had been carved to a spindle by wind and wave. Fully two hundred fathoms in height, its midnight surface glistened in the sun and commanded nothing but water as far as the eye could see. The white specks of seabirds hovered around its middle, their landing places having streaked its sides over centuries. Absinthe looked to the sun and back again at the long finger of shadow that the Spire threw across the waters. What he had noticed just before they were attacked still held true, and soon the *Crimson Moon* would be in a position to prove him right.

He walked around the narrow stone towers of the forecastle, which were drinking in the butter-yellow light of the sun, and climbed into the shrouds of the foremast. If he walked the length of the ship back to the quarterdeck, it would take him an hour; but the system of ropes he had placed in the rigging as a child had never been removed.

The sails were set in royal trim, to make the ship lay alow. Presently he was standing on the royal yard, the russet sail behind him pregnant with wind. He grasped the rope and launched himself into the air.

They hadn't been taken unawares. The wind was southerly, near the direction of the sun, and the *Moon* was on a larboard tack, approaching the Spire from east-southeast. The *Cloudsprit Dauntless* came out of a scudding of cloud up in Cumulo, when the horizon was still washed in purple, and bore down on them from above with her great membranous wings supplanting her sails to angle her downward.

Gouts of water burst from the *Moon*'s hold as she dropped ballast and leaped into the air. Laying on sail, she rose to twice the height of the Spire. The *Dauntless*'s bow chasers coughed, but the balls missed, splashing silently into Ocean.

The *Dauntless* was abaft the beam, and the *Moon* angled her sails to steer her more westerly and bring her three gun decks to bear. The *Dauntless* bore down fast. She had fewer decks than the *Moon,* less than a hundred, but her wings made her strong and speedy, and she was more maneuverable, too.

The *Moon* hauled wind. The sun, rising, kissed the hull of the *Dauntless.* The ship's flanks were colored a honeyed mahogany, burnished deep through centuries of sailing level upon level of cloud. Flecks of white dotted its surface where the civilian population had laid out its laundry in the morning air and hadn't gotten word to take it in for battle. Patches, the boatswain, joked that they had done so on purpose, to lay on more sail, the giant bloomers of their zaftig women being sufficient to achieve five knots alone.

She came on. Nine-pounders from her starboard bow belched smoke a second before a sound was heard, and then a distant boom-boom-boom echoed between the two greatships' hulls. The *Moon* answered in kind, though the angle was still not right; and then another sound began, like distant thunder or a low moan, mixed with a periodic, high-pitched snapping. The enemy's great wings, painted with black pitch to make them stiff, strained against the wind and shivered the wooden ribs that stretched them taut.

The *Dauntless* filled the sky, its rigging etching a spider's web across the sun. As the two ships slid past each other, Absinthe could see men on her decks, tiny figures, dark and somber; and even a few brave civilians peeped out of portholes in the lower levels, feral and hungry souls all.

The *Moon*'s thirty-two-pounders roared. Tiny shafts of sunlight burst from the *Dauntless*'s starboard wing as balls pierced it. Then the wing whooshed past, black as night and then smoke-colored, as it exposed the side taking in the sun. Hot wind blew across the faces of the *Moon*'s crew—and revealed half a deck of cannon in position for a volley.

The *Moon*'s starboard gingerbread burst into splinters from a shower of grape. An aberrant ball tore the forecastle door. Thunder bellowed all around them as balls ricocheted between the *Moon*'s twelve masts. The lady lost her hands and the crimson orb they held. Then it was over and the *Dauntless* was abaft, sailing toward the Spire, no doubt at that very moment angling its compass on the shadow that it cast. The ship dipped to a dangerous handful of fathoms above the surface of Ocean, its skull-and-crown banner flapping from its stern, and then spat ballast to rise into the air.

Absinthe had watched as it climbed the bowl of the sky like a spider, into Cumulo, through the Blue, to meld with the fickle clouds up in Cordelio. No more battle would come for now. Both ships were racing to pearls and plenty and there was no time. They were the last two greatships in the world, and pyrates both. There would be plenty of time for fighting later.

Now he landed on the topsail spar of the aft-main and looked along the line of the Spire's shadow, shaking his head. How could he fool himself so, to think that he could find the treasure? He had always missed at pistols, even with the one his father had given him on his thirteenth birthday. During the time they had to land on water to wait for a blow of argent dyoro to refill the bags, unable to sail up to the Calms, he fell into Ocean as the ship leapt into the air, and

his father had to rescue him. And when he thought he could climb into the rigging and hang from his knees like the jacks, he fell, and his father was there to witness his shame. It always came down to luck, a treasure Absinthe had spent long ago, if he had ever possessed it. How else could a blade be drawn slowly in the night under Andaluse, the knife's edge crimson from more than the light of the moon?

He grabbed the next rope and swung into the air.

It was like any other day, as far as the population was concerned, as if they didn't know that it was the morning of the Three-Full Ebb, which occurred but once every hundred years, when the shadow of the Spire pointed to the treasure of the First and Last Pyrate King. On a ship that held thousands besides the crew, commerce held sway. Taverns on decks such as Red Lantern would be exchanging night patrons for day. Cigar rollers would be laying out kelp to dry and brewers would be tapping their vats on Market Row. On deck, money flew between crew and civilians for everything from candles and carvings to curry and cuirasses. Even at his height in the masts came the smells of greenweed and cinnamon and lavender, to mix with the pungent tar of the ropes.

Absinthe alighted on the quarterdeck. The speaking tubes that communicated with the entire ship glistened brassy in their brackets. Patches was commanding the repair of braces, while the sailing master, Whist, adjusted his signal flags as they continued to maneuver near the Spire. Three Hails Barty was participating in the securing of the sea rats, mostly by aiming a swivel gun upon the jolly boat, which was awaiting orders to dock.

Absinthe stood beside his quartermaster, Doubloon, whose gold coin winked as he flipped it into the air and caught it without looking.

"Let me address the question," Absinthe said to his second in command, bracing for admonishment. "I am going to break my neck swinging from the rigging like that, and a figurehead can't possibly be as important as the replacement of a mast." Almost as an afterthought, he called to his master at arms. "Let them aboard, Barty." Barty remained motionless.

Doubloon flipped his coin again and looked thoughtful. He favored green. His coat of emerald velvet set off the gold of his coin to full effect, as it was no doubt meant to, but it was its impeccable tailoring and cleanliness that was so maddening. Absinthe felt a sea rat himself by comparison. His red sailor's breeches needed letting in, and his rapier and pistol hung off of him at odd enough angles to match the jauntiness of his hat. He knew that the scarf wound tight around his neck was the only thing tidy about him.

"The luck of the ship resides in the lady, and it is important to maintain it," Doubloon said, a little too flatly. He flipped his coin. "No, I was going to say that I am not sure of the reasoning behind bringing aboard two bedraggled fisherfolk, whose lot has cast them upon the base of the Spire a hundred leagues from the Cay of Campania."

"Information," Absinthe said. Doubloon's wife had gone over to the *Dauntless* when Absinthe's father, who had been captain of the *Moon,* had betrayed his crew. The wife had crossed over to the *Dauntless* in the company of Fisheye and Pyles and the pale-faced whisperer Mylke, as well as all the other mutineers, led by the captain himself. She had turned around before boarding the boat that would take them to the Dauntless and called to Doubloon that he could buy her back for one gold denir, which was twice, she had said, what Mylke had paid her for one night's pleasure.

"We shall see what they saw," Absinthe said, and then called out again to Barty. "Let them aboard, sar."

Three Hails Barty stood immovable. It usually took three times to tell him to do something before he actually did it, whether because he was deaf from cannon or naturally obstinate, no one was quite sure.

The sea rats had signaled to them in the dawn light as they approached the Spire. It was unheard of for fishermen to be so far from what little shore was left in the world, what with the dangers of the deep; but perhaps they had been following glowfish and became disoriented, or had been rolling the dice in pursuit of succulent speer. Their little waterboat was dashed to splinters upon the scant pebbles that served the Spire as a base.

"Mr. Barty, dock that boat and bring those rats aboard," Absinthe said.

Three Hails swung his gun about and motioned for the jolly boat to dock. The boy at its rudder bobbed his head. The twins Brace and Brack had fetched the two sea rats, so the vessel was packed full. Its bags of argent dyoro were just barely large enough to hold all the weight aloft, but eventually it bumped gently against the railing.

The watch bell chimed as the rats came aboard. "Six bells and all's not well," intoned Candlebert in his usual way as he turned the glass. "'Twas a breach in her side, that sank her to the tide."

Absinthe climbed down to the main deck to meet them. At first he thought they were dressed in strands of blue and green seaweed, so watery and ragged were they; but presently he discerned they merely were dressed in woolens that had seen better days and had been soaked by the waves. One was tall and had a belly the size of a thirty-two-pound ball. The other was tiny by comparison, all bones, with a spindly neck whose wattles showed his age. This one held a leash, at the end of which a crab snapped its pincers as it stared at Absinthe with piercing blue eyes.

Patches had come down to see. He held his hands as if in prayer when he spied the crab. "What a lovely pet," he cooed.

"Gracious good greetin's, Cap'n Abscess, sar," said the fat one.

THE RUST-COLORED SAILS THRUMMED AROUND HIM, BLAZONING IN A HIGH SUN WITH THE SCENT OF CINNAMON BLOWN INTO HIS FACE FROM FAR-OFF, IF IMAGINARY, LANDS.

"Gracious thanks for rescuin' us from our predicament."

"I haven't rescued you yet," said Absinthe. "What do you want?"

"Har, har," said the skinny one, displaying the two or three teeth he possessed as he threw back his head to speak. "Hempen rope. Pink shells. Sea peas. Sea peas!" He stopped and looked at Absinthe with goggling eyes.

"He says," said the fat one, "beggin' your pardon, Cap'n Absent, sar, that we desire to join your crew, having four strong hands—well, two, being mine, and a claw or two, as it 'twere."

Absinthe crossed his arms. "And why do you wish to join my crew?"

"Har, har," said Sea Peas. "Brass blade. Tarry fish. Serpent fang."

"He says, Cap'n Obstinate, sar, that you are the one to join, your father being a sorcerer and a traitor and one as what does traffic with what lurks in the deep."

"Is that so. Tell me, did the *Dauntless* arrive before us and fly to Cumulo to await our arrival? Did you see?"

"Har, har," said Sea Peas. "Chum flower. Blue rock. Sand straps."

"He says it did," said the fat one, "and that we saw it with our own eyes, but we did not signal it, 'cause it be you who will get the treasure of the First and Last, being as one with smarts to do it, unlike all the others who missed out, as it 'twere, all these nine hundred year."

"Har, har. Iron wave. Foot spoon. Crumbly teeth."

"He says, Cap'n Abominate, sar, that it be the chance of a lifetime to sail with what will find the treasure, the Three-Full Ebb comin' once in a hunnard year, and the Spire revealin' the direction only on that day, pointin', as it 'twere, directly right to it."

"And what is the real reason the *Dauntless* dropped you off here?" Absinthe asked.

"Har, har," said Sea Peas, his eyes narrowing to slits. "Bronze blood. Crow feather. Black coral."

The fat one fidgeted. "He says, Cap'n Abscond, sar, that it did not

drop us off, that we are but poor lost souls, who wish to see you crowned, the treasure containing the headpiece, as it 'twere, of the First and Last, and what does have it being the king, once he steals it and places it upon his own head."

"Crow feather," Absinthe mused. "Steals. Black coral." He fingered the scarf around his neck and drew the brim of his hat low upon his eyes.

The feather in his hat was the very same that his captain father had tied into his hair that day long ago, when he was barely ten years old, when he found the crow in the lee rigging. It was a bright day with a freshening breeze when Monteroy scurried over the fore-mizzen. The rust-colored sails thrummed around him, blazoning in a high sun with the scent of cinnamon blown into his face from far-off, if imaginary, lands. Cumulo was clear, as well as the Blue, and Cordelio was not angered and thunder-torn as usual, but held mounds of cloud gold and red near the horizon. Above these, he could catch purple splashes of argent dyoro hovering up in the Calms of Dellabrynda, and, higher still, the hint of white mountains of cloud in Caprico.

He was high up on the mast, high enough even to be able to see the entire greatship below him, with the cool wind prickling his skin, when he saw something black and struggling in the lee rigging. He carefully extracted the crow from its prison. It pecked at his hand playfully and gazed at him with reddish-black eyes. He was jubilant over his prize. It was something rare to find, and doubly so since they were seven days out from Rhymer Bay and any other land. He was already making plans for fashioning a cage as he crawled down the mast, holding the creature in one hand carefully against his chest.

When Monteroy alighted on the boards his father was waiting for him. His broad face was set in a dark expression as if holding back a thunderhead and his black-booted feet were set wide and firm. Captain Abelairde was a huge man, and it didn't take much more than a gesture or a stamp of a foot to cow even the bravest of the crew.

THE GULL STREAM HAD THEM IN ITS GRIP THAT NIGHT LIKE A LEAF IN A WINTER WIND. SHROUDS SANG, SPARS CREAKED, AND CANVAS HUMMED. IT WAS ALL THEY COULD DO TO KEEP HER STEADY.

"Give it here," his father said.

"But— " Monteroy said, words catching in his throat.

"It is not a dove," his father said quietly. "It is not a gull. Give it here."

He could hardly speak. "What will ... "

"I will set it free," his father said.

The crow fluttered in Monteroy's hands. He wanted to tell his father how to hold it, but he knew that would draw a sharp rebuke. He slowly handed the crow over, his heart breaking.

Captain Abelairde closed his hand around the crow and circled the forefinger and thumb of his other hand around the crow's neck. The hand dropped and gave the crow one shake. At his father's knee the crow spasmed briefly, and then was still, the wings sticking out all wrong.

Monteroy fell to his knees.

"Get up!" his father roared.

Monteroy stood. A great burning gulf opened in his chest. He was determined not to cry. That would make everything worse.

"One way or the other you'll learn the signs," his father said quietly. "A crow is a terrible omen. They are blown into the rigging when a storm is approaching. You'll learn." He tore a feather from the crow's wing and tossed the body to one of the crew. "Burn it."

His father's fingers tore at his hair as he tied the feather into Monteroy's locks. "This will remind you not to draw bad luck to yourself as if it's your mother."

His pride and happiness turned to ashes. It didn't matter that the crow was in the lee rigging and not the weather, and that there were no clouds in Cumulo. He should have known about crows, and all the men saw it. They knew him for a foolish boy.

Worst of all, a white squall came out of Cordelio that evening and laid the ship beam on. Terrible black rain pummeled them unmercifully. His father had been right.

"Har, har," said the skinny sea rat with the wattled neck. "Boiled north. Bent tines. Green beer."

The fat one shuffled his feet nervously. "He says, beggin' your pardon, Cap'n Abdicate, sar, that if you do find the crown, since you won't be needin' it, he'd like to use it for a shat bucket, to make it worth something."

Sunlight flashed from Absinthe's rapier as it sliced through the air, cut the fat one's shirt to ribbons and broke the leash holding the crab, the end of the rope landing at the feet of Patches, who eagerly snatched it up. Absinthe slammed the fat one to the deck. Doubloon's pistol was leveled at Sea Peas, whose mouth promptly shut.

The fat one's face scraped against the planks as Absinthe's knee dug into his neck. He tore apart the sea rat's shirt with his free hand and revealed a tattoo between the man's shoulder blades: a blue, coiled tentacle.

"You are a spy and a fool," Absinthe growled. He drew a crimson circle of blood around the tattoo with the point of his sword.

The fat one screamed. "No, sar, no! We saw sumpin'. We saw him cast a spell!"

"Did you now." Absinthe said. "Bind him," he directed his men.

He grabbed the skinny one and slammed him against the railing. The few remaining teeth in the sea rat's head flew over the side of the ship. Absinthe ripped apart his shirt. The same tattoo glared at him from the old man's back. He etched a circle around that one too.

"Spare us and we'll tell you all!" the fat one cried from the deck. "We saw the glystre. We saw what he done!"

Absinthe planted a boot on the circle he had drawn on the fat one's back. "You bear my mark now. Speak." He looked toward the Spire. The ship was swinging into position, with the sun fully to larboard and the ship so low in the air he imagined the waves licking her keel.

"He cast a spell, he did," said the fat one. "He cast a glystre to move the shadow so it 'tweren't pointin' to the treasure!"

Absinthe yanked on the man's bonds to stand him up and placed the edge of his rapier beneath his chin. "You think I'm a fool," he said. "I don't need a fat slimy rat to act like it's smarter than me, just to save its skin. Your master set you adrift to delay me with talk of joining my crew. My father thought I would rescue you because he thought I would be kind. He thought I would be generous. He thought I would be merciful." Absinthe drew his sword ever so slowly across the man's neck. A thin line of crimson glistened on the blade. "I am none of those things. I am a pyrate. And I will be king."

They all could see it now. The great bulk of the *Crimson Moon*, its decks upon decks, its many masts, the broad blades of its rudder fans, even its thousands of souls, cast a single, enormous shadow across the whirling green waters of Ocean, even to the horizon, and at an angle to the one cast by the Spire. The two shadows began at the same point, but ran in different directions, with barely three points between them.

"My father betrayed me long before he betrayed this ship," Absinthe said, a red rage burning in his chest. "I already noticed the shadow didn't align with the sun. I know what glystre can do and how it can deceive. I will take the Pyrate King's treasure and his crown, and I will hunt down the *Dauntless* and send it to Harrowdeep to dance with the dead!" He turned to his helmsman, Argyle. "There is your course," he said, pointing to the shadow cast by the *Moon*. "I want every stitch of canvas now!" He shoved the sea rat away from him.

"And cast these two upon the Spire."

His men hurried to obey. The sea rats were loaded aboard the jolly boat. They both had been bound with their hands behind their backs. As the boat drew away, they turned to face him.

"Har, har," said Sea Peas, though not as strongly as before. "Broken plank. Red sails. Leviathan's arse!"

"He says, Cap'n Absinthe, sar," said the fat one meekly, blood dribbling down his chest, "what makes you think you can find and keep the treasure, when your own strong and righteous father is what desires it just as much?"

"Because it is cursed," Absinthe said, reaching behind his neck to tighten his scarf, which had become loose in the struggle. "And so am I."

The jolly boat sailed toward the Spire. Doubloon had put away his pistol and was once again flipping his coin. It sailed end over end in the air, reflecting the sunrise, flashing round and full. Absinthe waited another moment for the jolly boat to get some distance from the ship, and then he snatched the coin in midair as it flashed, gold on gold. Doubloon's eyebrows lifted.

"Belay that order," Absinthe said. "Follow the Spire's shadow, not ours."

Without hesitation Doubloon conveyed the orders through hand signals. Argyle spun the wheel. Whist's flags snapped a new pattern.

Doubloon waited. "Captain?"

Absinthe held up the coin at arm's length and used it to cover the sun. He smiled. "My father didn't move the shadow of the Spire. He moved the image of the sun."

Doubloon raised his eyebrows ever so slightly.

"Like I said, I know how glystre works," Absinthe said. "It works with illusions of light, not shadow. And the sea rats gave up their information too easily. The sun is the illusion, not the shadow." Satisfied, he idly examined the coin in his hand. The sardonic smile of Donati Sangre, a captain two hundred years dead, beamed up at him. He flipped it to the tail side. Sangre grinned at him from that side, too.

He looked at his quartermaster, amused. "Doubloon, this coin has two heads."

Doubloon sighed and patiently held out his hand for his coin. "Luck, Captain. Sometimes you have to cheat it to win."

The Gull Stream had them in its grip that night like a leaf in a winter wind. Shrouds sang, spars creaked, and canvas hummed. It was all they could do to keep her steady. The roll and pitch caused the mayor of Gloustenbury, from thirty decks down, to come above to complain, his speaking tube at the ready; but the sight of the Three-Full Ebb made him mute and he scurried back below. No one alive had ever before seen the sight of all three moons full and glowering.

From Cumulo up to Cordelio the sky was clear. Even up in the Calms of Dellabrynda, where scudded the thin layers of argent dyoro, the air was free, as it was through Caprico and the Calms of Alahambra. Even Tempestes, where thunderheads would gather to lay waste to any ship willing to sail that high, had only one or two black-bellied clouds to fill it. From the Airs to the Reach, a vista lay open whose distances were not only seen by the eyes but felt in the belly, hollow and vast, and allowed the stars to sparkle on the surface of Ocean.

All three moons glowed full. Blue Sussurus, the largest, burned bright and daring, its pale, pockmarked stone tempting one to think of sapphires and cabochons. Little red Andaluse shone like an angry eye, hazy and mysterious. And the middle-size one, Tundaroon, beamed a rich, verdant green, teasing one to recall such foolish legends as the one about Jolly Jack Robin, sailing past the Star Stream to that emerald orb aboard the *Barnaby Rush*.

"Four bells and all's not well," shouted Candlebert as he turned the glass. "'Twas from lack of powder dry, that her bodies dead do lie."

The topgallant yard of the aft-mizzen snapped, but silently, so heavily did the whirling wind buffet their ears. Only when raffle cascaded down in a shower of splintered wood did they know what had happened.

"Steady on!" commanded Captain Absinthe, though the winds tore the words away into the void. "For pearls and plenty, lads!" *And a crown to make me your king,* he thought.

The clarity of the sky made the decision to risk the Gull Stream easier, but he had given the order to lay aloft so many times that Sailing Master Whist had fixed him with a look that was both fearful and accusing. But the time they might make up by attempting the dangerous winds was indisputable.

When all three moons were full every hundred years, they created a tide that unveiled Glastongharst, a city that had been buried in Ocean since Leviathan first began devouring the land. It was there that the First and Last had buried his treasure and his crown. On the morning of the Ebb, the Spire pointed the way, to where Glastongharst rose out of the sea to reveal its sunken horde. Over the centuries, other captains had tried to secure the crown every Three-Full Ebb. Most times, ships hammered each other with cannon and bumberbuss and sword before they even got close to finding a denir, or survived to give a description of the city. That was the treasure's curse.

The *Crimson Moon* moaned under the press of wind. The great sails bellied full and shrouds shivered. On the quarterdeck, Absinthe braced himself as best he could, feet apart and one hand on the railing, while his other hand traced a line along the scarf about his neck.

Yes, part of finding the crown was to keep it away from his father. Abelairde now had the ship he wanted, one full of those who believed that Leviathan must be appeased, to keep it from further devouring the land. There was no telling what they would do or command if they had the crown, and for an instant an image came to Absinthe's mind, of a blade reflecting the light of Andaluse, the color of blood, and a memory of terrible pain and a forceful hand at his back.

His hand kept checking the position of his scarf until he finally noticed pale blue light washing the eastern horizon. They had sailed through the night. And there, far away, a creamy dot floated on the surface of Ocean.

"Glastongharst," Argyle said matter-of-factly.

Absinthe let go of his scarf to grip the rail with both hands. "Lay alow!" he called.

It would still take them another glass or two to reach the land. His heart skipped a beat as he allowed himself to hope, just one more time; but as they drew closer the light revealed a shadow floating over the city: the *Cloudsprit Dauntless.*

They were too late.

The rust-red sails of the ship bellied full as they chased the wind. They sailed the Blue, with a scudding of cloud beneath them in Cumulo. The wind smelled of coconut and pepper, blown in, no doubt, from some far off memory of land, perhaps Juniper or Leland, or even outrageous Cocoa Boa.

Candlebert rang the bell, cutting the air with its discordant notes. Bing-bing, bing-bong, bong-bing.

"Six bells and all's not well," Candlebert cried. "'Twas from a curvy sword, that her bitter blood was poured."

Absinthe ran a finger across the crow feather in his hat. Then he cleared his throat and in barely a whisper said, "Beat to quarters, all hands." He signaled, and the ship descended into cloud.

The mayor of Gloustenbury climbed the steps to the quarterdeck, huffing and puffing, and bellowed through his speaking tube to Argyle at the wheel, who clearly wasn't in a mood for foolishness.

"Captain," said the mayor to Argyle, "if you are preparing for battle, I feel it is my duty to inform the citizenry. I object most strongly — "

"Mayor," said Absinthe calmly as he came up behind him. "I am the captain, as you well know, however much you may not like it." The mayor turned and frowned at Absinthe. "The citizenry will participate in the battle, or, rather, a certain portion of them. I have a special request to make."

The mayor's eyes grew wide with anticipation as he raised his speaking tube to his ear to listen.

When the clouds cleared, Glastongharst lay below them. Absinthe caught his breath.

The city gleamed as if just released from the sea. Great marble domes sparkled with sunlight, while the spaces between them glimmered with what looked like pavers of gold. Pink columns marched in procession down grand boulevards, while oval, emerald windows winked to each other at the tops of slender towers. The levels of cloud above made dapples of light swim around each other over a shimmering fugue of architecture, as if the city were still below the sea. But it wasn't in the depths; it was in sunlight and shade, and Ocean looked a field of green velvet coddling a jewel.

The *Cloudsprit Dauntless* floated west of the city. Its great wings were drawn in, but it was no less menacing for that. She was on a starboard tack, close-hauled with just a few points of lee-way into the northerly wind, so that she was slowly making north-northwest. If she were circling the city, she would have to bring her head around to a larboard tack soon.

Absinthe cursed. He had to haul his wind now, so she could not bear down on them from the weather side when she made her turn.

He barked the order. The starboard braces were slackened as the larboard were pulled in, angling the yards forward, while the lowest sheets were hauled farther aft.

"Helm a-port!" Absinthe commanded.

The *Crimson Moon* swung her head west, directly toward the city, with the *Dauntless* still to starboard.

"The *Dauntless* signals, Cap'n, sar," said the boy Lank from the rail, his shock of red hair fluffing in the wind as he blinked through his enormous spectacles.

"It's the light of their matches," Absinthe said.

"No, sar, Cap'n, sar," said Lank, gazing back at the *Dauntless*. "It's —it's a message."

"Well?"

"Parley, Cap'n. About—it's about the crow, he says." Lank turned to his captain with eyes three times their normal size from the thickness of the glass. "He seeks parley about the crow, he says."

Absinthe felt a yawning chasm open in his stomach. His heart beat in his chest like a caged bird.

Lank turned back to the signal and jumped. "Forgive me, Cap'n, sar. That's not it. The crown. He says it's about the crown." He blinked at his captain. "Sorry, sar."

Absinthe, irritated, let out his breath. "That's all right, lad. He meant both."

The *Dauntless* made her turn. Her larboard wing cranked open as she changed tack; the wind caught it and snapped it full. She swung around fully ten points in a matter of seconds before the wing was hauled in. Her sinewy lines crawled over the city now, casting spider shadows across the domes.

"Trim all sharp!" Absinthe cried.

The sails were set close-hauled and the *Crimson Moon* swung another few points to the north. If they turned tight enough they could approach from the *Dauntless*'s weather side. If his father allowed that, maybe he was sincere about a parley.

"Signal her back and accept," Absinthe said. Lank nodded and opened the flap of his lantern.

The *Dauntless* approached slowly. Though a might smaller than the *Moon*, her sleeker lines cut through the air like a knife. Presently they could see her crew rabbiting over her rigging as civilians snapped shut windows in her lower decks. Her gun ports slewed open, the great mouths of her metal yawning black across her triple gun decks.

"Let out the plank, Mr. Barty," Absinthe called out. Three Hails did nothing.

The *Dauntless* slid closer and closer on the *Moon*'s larboard side. She hove to, laying her mainsails aback while her foresails were kept full. Absinthe likewise arranged his sails to stop their progress. The two ships sidled across from each other, bobbing this way and that. Wind skirled around them, caught and then released from the sails and curling around the great hulls as if it knew not what to do.

"Let out the plank, Mr. Barty." After Absinthe barked the order again, Three Hails and two of his mates angled the plank over the side and swung its other end onto the gangway of the *Dauntless*. Stopped in their flight, both ships floated over the marble city, connected by a thin sheet of wood. The gun decks of both ships faced each other barely half a chain across, so that if either ship fired full, the other would be opened from head to stern and flutter wrecked across those fanciful, gold-paved streets, three hundred fathoms below.

Absinthe stepped onto the platform. It bowed in the middle from its own weight and the ships could not be kept perfectly aligned, so that one end gently rose up while the other sank down, in seesaw motion. The wind buffeted him about the face. He felt the thrum of the plank beneath his boots as his father stepped onto the other end of the plank.

Abelairde Absinthe had lost weight, his son noticed, and his hair had grown more gray. His coat of red leather and his crimson taffeta breeches had seen better days, and gone was the velvet shirt cuffed with gold lace, to be replaced by a simple, checked wool one. He carried a single sword instead of his three brace of pistols; its ricasso took the form of a silver tentacle slithering out of the hilt. His broad head and broad feet and broad hands looked still bluff and strong, however, and his boots slapped the plank so hard it bounced.

They met near the middle. Absinthe noticed that his father's eyes had grown paler, the deep blue fading to ice, a result of practicing glystre, he had heard. Famed Madame Blue, seeress of stars and widow of the sea, had been so named for it.

The city glittered below them. Absinthe had the wind at his back, but his father had the sun at his.

When his father smiled it was the old smile, ear to ear and mocking. "You're late."

"I had a run-in with a few sea rats."

"Oh, yes? Fine gentlemen, to be sure."

"Loyal to a fault. They tried to send me off course. As you intended when you planted them there."

"Really? And how did they do that? Taunt you, perhaps? Get you angry so that you had to pry information out of them?"

Absinthe shifted his feet. The plank was thin. It jounced with the slightest shift in weight. Each end rose and fell.

"Do you think I don't know my own son and what he trusts? They did their job, yes. To make sure you followed the right shadow and came here. Bad luck, that."

The wind had picked up, flurrying the crow feather in Absinthe's hat.

"Glystre," Absinthe said. "Empty words."

"You won't learn. You won't listen."

"So you have the crown. You got here first."

"I don't have the crown. That's why you're here." Abelairde gestured to the glittering city below. "It will sink back soon into the depths with the tide. I haven't found it. If we search together we will take all that gold and ivory and silver. Pearls and plenty."

"And who will take the crown?"

"Oh, tar and damn your crown!" his father growled, eyes flashing their old familiar sapphire. "There are only two greatships left in the world. A crown for what? To rule seaweed and fish?"

"You serve the master of the deep."

"Of course I do. Because I know the world. Because I don't fool myself with notions of kings, of bringing back false hope of provinces now swimming in the deep. For a thousand years they have slept beneath the waves, and will for ever more. Your kings are dead." He shook his head. "I left the *Moon* because its crew didn't believe the truth, about how to make the waters stop, that the beast must be appeased."

The sun was in Absinthe's eyes. What was glystre and what was truth?

"At least this way we can gain a treasure that has eluded captains

for nine hundred years," his father said. "I need your help. There is no time. Come down with me to the city. We can combine our crews and search. Or you can leave—leave and take your notions of crowns and kings with you."

His father paused and looked at him, searching. Then he shook his head and turned away. He walked along the plank back to his ship.

An intense rage filled Absinthe then. Words choked in his throat. His father turned away, and seemed to turn away again—and again. Hadn't it always been so?

The scarf around Absinthe's neck grew tighter. Words stuck there, suffocating him. *I don't believe you. I believe you. You're a liar, a liar, a liar.* The scarf squeezed like a noose. His hand flew to his throat.

"I haven't given you my answer," Absinthe said weakly.

His father, nearly to his ship, turned slowly, eyes wide, arms outstretched. "Yes, you did. Your silence gives it. As it always has done."

Sunlight sparked in Absinthe's eyes. "I haven't given you my answer."

"He speaks." His father said for all to hear. Eyes peeped from portholes and over railings. "He speaks."

"Let me speak, sar."

"Oh, I want to hear it. Your answer. Yes, here comes the answer. We're all going to hear the answer now. Yes, boy, what is it? It must be important. We're all waiting— "

"Damn you, sar." The words tore out of his throat. "Damn you, sar, is my answer."

"Well, that answers everything, doesn't it, sar. That's all you have to say?"

"Damn you, sar, is my answer!" He couldn't stem the flood of words. "Damn you to the deep!"

"Oh, too late for that, sar!"

The crews, infected by the words, shouted at each other, ship to ship. Swords were waved and muskets aimed. All became red in Absinthe's eyes.

"What will you do now, then?" his father shouted. "That is your answer, sar?"

"I give you my answer, sar!"

"Will you shoot me, boy? Draw your pistol and shoot me, you skarl, you rogue—shoot me dead and have done. Shoot me now!"

Absinthe drew his pistol and aimed it at his father's heart. "Shoot me, damn you, sar!" his father bellowed. "I trust your bad luck. Your pistol will misfire, sar. You'll miss— "

"Damn you, sar!"

" —you'll shoot my helmsman. You'll shoot my ship. The wind will carry your pistol out of your hands before you squeeze. I trust your cursed luck. Shoot!"

A red and terrible rage filled Absinthe's chest. His arm was steady and true. His finger tightened on the trigger. If he shot, the parley would be over and both sides would let loose their cannon and all would fall as ruin to the deep. He didn't care. He didn't care....

"Your mother died in a bed of blood when you were born, and you've been cursed ever since," his father said. "I trust your bad luck. Shoot me, you scurvy cur, you mangy whelp, and I'll live to cut you down!"

Absinthe squeezed the trigger another hair. He knew his aim would be sure. How could he miss? But his father seemed so certain. How could he know? Luck—it always came down to luck. Whenever he missed at pistols, when he fell into Ocean, when the rope gave way as he hung from the rigging, his father had been waiting there—his father had always been there, to witness his bad luck. His father had always been there to see it happen.

And on that one night, in the light of the crimson moon, when the knife was drawn slowly across and the edge was colored red, not from Andaluse, but from blood, his blood, and the other hand held him by the neck, pushing him forward so that the blood from his throat spilled over the ship's railing down to Ocean, to sink, to sink down even to Harrowdeep, to be drunk by Leviathan—it was the same hand, the same hand each time, that pushed him over the railing when they waited for the blow, that handed him a pistol, that waited to set him on his feet when he fell from the yard. It had always been his father's hand. *By the Thirteen,* he thought, his mind swimming. *By the Thirteen.* His father had always been the instrument of his bad luck. Could it be so?

Damn them all, he thought. *Damn them all to Harrowdeep.* It was another trap, surely, but what could he do?

Doubloon's words came back to him, then. "Luck, Captain. Sometimes you have to cheat it to win."

The plank swayed. The ships shifted. The crews eyed each other with murder in their hearts. It was time to take luck out of the equation.

Absinthe held his pistol over the plank and let it go. It fell end over end. It disappeared far below, shattering, no doubt, on some paving of gold. He then drew his rapier and assumed the beetling stance. He held the hilt in his right hand close to his left cheek, lightly, as if cradling an egg, while his left palm cupped the pommel and described a tiny circle to make the point dance mesmerically in the air.

"Oh, well done," his father said, though some of his bluff was gone. "But the parley is over, unless I draw as well, which I will not do. I know better than to treat in a young man's game."

The *Crimson Moon* dipped. The plank angled downward on Absinthe's side. His father's boots skidded on the wood as he sought

THE CITY GLISTENED BELOW. IT GLITTERED, BUT THE GLITTER FADED AWAY. GONE WERE THE STREETS OF GOLD, THE ALABASTER COLUMNS, THE LAPIS DOMES.

to keep his balance. He slid toward Absinthe, and to avoid being skewered, drew his own sword. Absinthe gripped his rapier firmly with his right hand, swinging it down, and then up, to meet his father's sword slicing from above. Abelairde's blade slewed along his, was turned, and joined again with a clang.

Absinthe had to fight his father's momentum at first, keeping to a defensive stance. His rapier had more reach, but his father's sidesword had more strength, and it was all he could do to let his father's blade slide along his, to dodge its flickering tip.

The plank righted itself level again and Absinthe's feet grew more sure. The ting-ting-ting of the beetling style knit itself through the air as the swords sang and flashed. He cast his father back a few steps, and was cast back himself in turn, as the plank jounced below, the wind fitfully curled, and the city below, during vertiginous glimpses as he checked his feet, glittered death.

Ting-tong-ting, the swords sang, matching each to each. Then his father grasped the tentacled ricasso of his blade with his other hand, and in half-sword fashion thrust out, this way and that, the point of the sword licking through the air like an adder's tongue. Absinthe dodged—left, right, up, down—as the tentacle flashed in the sun and the tip of the sword glowed bright. But on a weakened downward stab he was able to lock the blade with his own and turn it up and away. His father completed the circle and slashed at Absinthe's knees.

Absinthe jumped. The blade cut air below him. Absinthe landed on the plank, which bounced disastrously, and his father backhanded, and forward again, Absinthe leaping at every swing, allowing the blade to meet empty air below him. Then he planted the rapier's tip in the plank and the swords met shivering. He drew out his blade and thrust to his father's face and chest and legs. But his father, despite his age, dodged back and back, and all Absinthe accomplished were tiny slashes on shirt and sleeve.

It was back to beetling, ting-ting-ting, the swords slewing and sliding. Sweat crept into Absinthe's eyes. The sun was in his face. He dodged and stabbed, and tried to keep his footwork up, while any misstep would send him flying down to Glastongharst. King-king-

king, the swords said, and he felt his arm grow weaker. He turned and turned his father's blade with his hilt and tried to close—a push could end it all—but the tentacled sword flashed and blocked.

The sun sparked from his father's sword as it weaved, drawing snakes in the air, and Absinthe could discern pinpricks of light flashing from his father's coat. But no, the sun was behind his father, and the sparks came from more than just buttons of gold. It was then he realized his own caged hilt was throwing reflections onto his father's chest.

He raised his aim higher. He pressed forward, taking advantage of his greater reach. Abelairde took one step back, two. Then Absinthe stepped back, allowing his father to cut and cut, and he slid back still more, all the while raising his arm and casting sunlight in his father's face from his hilt, until with a bellow his father cut across him with a broad swing.

Absinthe leaped back again, angled his hilt to flash light into his father's eyes, and when Abelairde's arm hesitated on the backswing, he lunged, and sliced with a backhand arc.

He saw the cut in his father's neck before there was any blood; then

THE BODY OF THE CREATURE WAS NOW VISIBLE, MADE OF GREAT RINGS OF MUSCLE, AND BELOW THE LEVEL OF THE HORNS CIRCLING THE MOUTH WAS A RING OF EYES...

it grew red and raw. His father stood frozen. He let go his sword, which spun down into the void. He fell to his knees. The plank shivered and Absinthe danced to keep his balance.

Abelairde's hands went to his throat, his eyes shocked and fearful. Absinthe walked forward and stood over him. He noticed his father's gray hair, his sunken cheeks, the wrinkles around his eyes.

"You are a man," Absinthe said, as much to himself as to his father. "You are a man."

Blood flowed from between Abelairde's fingers. He opened his mouth to speak, closed it, and then opened it again.

"Get up!" Absinthe screamed.

Abelairde's mouth formed words. He tried again. When he spoke, his voice croaked. "You cut my throat."

"You cut mine."

Abelairde shook his head, defiant. "I stayed my hand."

"You wanted me dead."

"I saved you and left you, because I didn't know what next the beast would make me do."

"And what has he made you do now?"

Abelairde looked up at his son and smiled, but not with his eyes.

The city glistened below. It glittered, but the glitter faded away. Gone were the streets of gold, the alabaster columns, the lapis domes. A city lay below them, but one with a sickly green glow etched in every corner of every building. The misshapen, slumped structures glistened wetly, as if freshly released from the sea. Green growths drizzled water from the roofs, or were the roofs themselves, grown loggy from years in the deep, leaning against each other to create new geometries. A whirling moan could faintly be heard under the wind as water gushed from windows and skirled along muddy streets. In counterpoint, a high, tinkling sound, as of ships' bells, rose into the air, perhaps the accumulated sound of hundreds of strands of seaweed dripping from hundreds of eaves as the city continued to slough off its mantle of fathomful depths.

Glystre, Absinthe thought. And now the real Glastongharst is revealed. But what turned his bowels to ice was what curled out of a pit in the center of the city.

It wasn't Leviathan; it was too small for that. But "small" was still the diameter of the *Moon* itself, and its great length, rising out of a whirlpool of emerald sludge, seemed endless as it raised its maw to his ship. A fetid stench erupted from its mouth, as of a mold gurgling for eons in the depths. A ring of black tines or horns, each the length of a mainmast, curled around the orifice, each looking sharp enough to open the ship from stem to stern.

"There is your Pyrate King," his father croaked, "and his bloody royal crown!"

Absinthe stood frozen in place for only a second, before he ran up the plank toward his ship.

"Set sails and make way north-northwest," he shouted, loud enough so all could hear, even the men of the *Dauntless.* "Prepare the larboard guns!"

Absinthe leaped over the rail onto his ship and immediately went to Doubloon's side. "Belay that order," he whispered. "Prepare the sails to be laid aback. Steer her into the wind. I want stern-way now." Doubloon accomplished the orders with hand signals without a moment's hesitation.

The creature was rising slowly to larboard. Absinthe turned to see his father get to his feet and walk back slowly to his ship.

The two ships separated. The plank, forgotten, splintered into pieces and fell through the sky just as Abelairde regained his deck. Argyle stood in front of the wheel with respect to the *Dauntless* to hide its furious spinning. It took time for the *Crimson Moon* to answer her helm, since they were not underway; but eventually the beating of the wind upon her rudder fans turned her north into it, and the sails, now laid aback by the impression of the wind, caused the Moon to move slowly, very slowly, backward.

Absinthe checked on the *Dauntless.* They were turned east-southeast and were cranking open the larboard wing, apparently to make room for the creature to attack the *Moon.* The *Moon*'s movement would convince them that she intended to fire upon the creature. Who else but a foolish boy would do otherwise? The delay now turned away the *Dauntless*'s larboard guns.

The *Moon* inched behind the *Dauntless,* a quarter-chain away, until the *Dauntless*'s great stern hove into view to starboard, full of fanciful gingerbread and glinting windows and rudder fans etched with ropes.

"Steady now," Absinthe whispered, as the two greatships slid alongside each other. The maw of the creature rose to engulf them, barely ten fathoms below.

Absinthe took a breath. "Starboard guns, fire!" he shouted.

Master Gunner Moog dropped his arm, and his signal went by mirror to tube to flag to hand to the quarter gunners below, whose yells were soon deafened as lanyards were pulled and flints sparked.

A concussive burst erupted from the *Moon.* The starboard guns belched fire, one and all, and great chokes of billowing cloud bloomed before them. All the windows of the *Dauntless*'s stern shattered. Wood splintered into a thousand pieces. Ropes controlling the rudder fans twanged as they were cut asunder. Some balls reached the wing, shivering some of its sections to tatters. Even some bags of argent had been pierced within the hull, the purple gas escaping straight to the sky. The acrid smell of powder filled the air as gun crews rammed dripping swabs down the hot throats of the cannon to clear out sparks and reload.

A great cheer went up from the men below. Then the *Dauntless*'s stern chasers belched smoke.

"Down, down!" Absinthe yelled and threw himself upon the deck. The air burst around him in a single blast. A sound rent the air like the tearing of sail, but he knew it was the balls, flying overhead. Some cut stays and shredded canvas. Some cut through men, taking legs and arms and lives. One took the head of Moog, whose body fell lifeless to the planks.

The *Dauntless* opened up its starboard wing, seeking to escape. The ship turned fully south, but her rudder swung loose and useless.

A thunder bellowed from below as the creature's mouth stretched wide.

"Blow all ballast now!" Absinthe commanded.

The signal was passed by tube and flag, down and down to the great tanks of water below. They sluiced full open. Ballast poured from the *Moon*'s hull in powerful jets. The giant bladders of argent dyoro did their work, and the ship leaped into the sky.

The deck heaved. The creature had delivered a glancing blow as it sought to claim its prize; denied, it went after easier prey, swinging its maw toward the *Cloudsprit Dauntless.*

The *Moon* rose higher and higher, past Cumulo and the Blue, through Cordelio and the Calms of Dellabrynda, up and up into the mountainous clouds of Caprico. The ship steadied and slowed into the Calms of Alahambra, but rose higher still.

Absinthe stood as others slowly regained their feet. Men on the decks were carrying comrades to the cockpit, for the surgeon to do his bloody work. He grimaced at the price his decisions made them pay.

"Let me address the question," he said to Doubloon, who had just regained his feet. "Do you think I attacked my father to get my revenge, or to make him weak, so that he became the new target for the creature?"

Doubloon extracted his coin from where he had stowed it in his vest pocket. "Neither, Captain. Actually, the question is on the wisdom of dropping all ballast. If we let go of all argent, we will fall to Ocean, and have no buoyancy in the air at all. The question, more simply, is, how do we get back down?"

Absinthe's heart warmed in the trust that Doubloon had for him. "Ballast is easy. We will simply take it from the air."

"Captain?"

Absinthe looked above, toward Tempestes, where black-bottomed clouds roiled.

Doubloon's eyes grew wide as he flipped his coin. "Aye, Captain."

Absinthe turned to give an order, then turned back instead. "And Doubloon, when the *Moon* dipped at just the right time, so that the plank was angled, forcing my father to attack—good luck, that. It couldn't have been from anyone's orders, of course."

Doubloon looked intrigued. "Oh, no, Captain. Indeed. I thought it was great good luck, as well."

Absinthe smiled and gave the order to lay aloft. His men looked at him as if he had lost his senses, even as they shortened sail and steered into a black cloud in Tempestes.

As they entered the cloud, the rain came down, black and pummeling, and slewed the ship, shaking it as if in a giant's hand. The scuppers were blocked and the drains opened. Great sheets of water cascaded down upon them, smelling of iron, and Absinthe and the others on deck crouched down, beaten down by the force. The deck roared with the accumulated sound of the water's flow, and Absinthe's commands had to be shouted over and over, especially when he instructed Three Hails Barty to take over for Master Moog. The ship heeled over in the whippering wind, and all held on as best they could, grabbing rail and rope and planking. Eventually, the drains did their work, as they led the water into the tanks. The ship began to sink.

Down they went, through the levels of cloud once more, taking half a glass to do so.

They emerged from Cumulo into the Airs leagues to the north of the *Dauntless,* having been carried when in Tempestes. Here the sun shone and the *Crimson Moon* glistened, shedding waterdrops as if gold coins, as the sails were hoisted once more and she made way south, building speed.

Absinthe fingered the scarf around his neck. "And now to finish it," he said.

The creature's great maw had breached the side of the *Dauntless.* Men at the rails fired with muskets and bumberbusses, and some swivel guns had been able to draw ichorous blood with a few small wounds. The body of the creature was now visible, made of great rings of muscle, and below the level of the horns circling the mouth was a ring of eyes, each the size of a platter, yellow, and slitted like a cat's.

The monster drove its head into the innards of the ship and drew out its feast.

The *Moon* sailed toward them, but slowly. They needed more sail.

Absinthe spoke into a brass tube that led thirty decks below. "Now, Mayor Gloustenbury."

Absinthe always thought that the women onboard the *Moon* were much prettier than those on the *Dauntless,* and certainly not as fat; but their bloomers should be sufficiently big, especially in concert as they were laid out from windows all along the lower decks, as he knew they were now, buffeting full and breezy in the wind.

Five knots, Patches had guessed their capacity, when he saw them the morning before on the *Dauntless.* Absinthe held a finger to the wind, and smiled.

The *Moon* sailed with the wind, as fast as canvas and bloomers could take it.

She approached the battle to starboard. The guns were ready. He could see now how much the *Dauntless* had been weakened, with sections of hull prized open, as well as the shaken sails and shivering masts. The creature buried its head in the hull once again. It shook, like a dog worrying a bone.

"We have range, Captain," Doubloon said quietly.

"Fire, Mr. Barty!" Absinthe cried.

Barty's arm was raised to give the signal. He did nothing.

Seaweeds hung from the sides of the creature, and barnacled things scurried up and down its flanks. As they drew closer, Absinthe could smell a rank odor, as of mold, or things long decaying in the deep, that the creature had brought with it from the depths. With shortened sails, they began to slow.

"Fire, Mr. Barty, sar!" Absinthe yelled. Barty did nothing.

Doubloon shifted his feet. Patches looked from his captain, to Doubloon, to Barty, and then to the sky, shrugging. Argyle stood stoically, but with eyes wide with fear, and the boy Lank goggled through his glasses. Whist ignored his flags, his mouth agape.

They drew alongside the *Dauntless* and its attacker. The men on its deck were in chaos. He could see his father, a bandage around his neck, giving orders that were hardly obeyed.

The creature reared back, readying another lunge, its maw erupting with a titanic moan.

"Fire, Mr. Barty, sar, damn yer soul!" Absinthe bellowed. "And send its filthy carcass to the deep!"

Three Hails Barty let fall his arm.

As one, the *Moon*'s starboard guns roared. Chunks of flesh burst from the creature's side. The guns were reloaded and fired again. At this close range not one missed. One ring of its body disappeared, and then two. Slowly, the massive body fell back, recoiling into the city, and the severed head fell away, its jaws snapping shut one last time before smashing into Ocean, sending a flame of water into the sky.

A great cheer went up from both ships. Absinthe could just make out his father on the other ship's quarterdeck. He thought he spied a smile, a defeated one, before the man walked into his cabin.

Absinthe fingered his scarf as he addressed Doubloon. "So, if not revenge and not to make the *Dauntless* victim to the creature, then what?"

Doubloon's clothing had become bloody and streaked with black powder, and yet his bearing had not lessened. He hesitated before flipping his coin. "Strategy ... Captain?"

Absinthe smiled. "In a fight of three, one holds back, to let the other two weaken each other. Yes, strategy. Nothing more."

He wouldn't destroy the *Cloudsprit Dauntless.* Though her crew had no more fight in them, he didn't want to harm her civilians, and he had no room for them on the *Moon.* They had all made their bargain for their captain and his beliefs; now they could live with it. Besides, the greatships should be preserved—but there was no reason not to plunder her from stem to stern.

There were pearls, and plenty besides, and sacks of gold denirs. But the real prize lay in the lower holds that the creature had not

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Name Day

Adolescence—it's all fun and games until it's not.

Big Orca grabbed my shoulder, his meaty hand lifting and propelling me on my tiptoes across a field of rye grass toward three teenagers, two girls and a boy, who lounged against a crude fence. "I want you to meet my friends." Big Orca's muscles bulged under his mottled black and white skin, and his huge feet trod tender plants into the wet ground, making more work for the field hands.

I ran, trying to keep up. "I would be honored."

Big Orca halted when we reached the others, but he maintained his grip on my arm. "Lupe, Clarity, Sunflower, this is—" he turned to me. "You haven't had your Name Day yet, have you?"

"No." I shook my head. "Soon, though."

Clarity gazed at me, and then opened a third eye in her forehead. The iris seemed to spin, orange and purple flecks flashing around a pupil deeper and blacker than the ones in ordinary eyes. "He's nervous. He wants us to like him."

BY GARTH UPSHAW
ILLUSTRATION BY ERIN AND KELLY CARTY

Sunflower leaned forward, flipping her bright golden hair over one shoulder. Her skin sparkled in the sunlight. "Are you a work baby?"

"Yeah."

Big Orca laughed. "No real shame in that. My father has sired over two dozen. It improves the stock. He got your mom for fishing work, though. He likes his consorts younger." Big Orca's father was the CEO here. He'd purchased my mother's contract on a trading trip to my village. We'd arrived yesterday.

Clarity closed her third eye. "So what do we call you until you get a real name?"

"My mom calls me 'Noodle,' or 'Pumpkin.'"

Lupe laughed, exposing a mouth full of sharp, white, canine teeth. Soft black hair covered his long, feral face. "Poodle? I like little dogs."

"Noodle." I blushed. I never seemed to say the right thing.

Big Orca turned me around like I was a candy stick he was trying to decide where to bite. "I think we'll call you 'Beanpole.' You haven't even started your manly growth yet." He let go of me, and leaned toward Sunflower, looming over her like a storm cloud. "Give me a kiss lovely, and we'll take Beanpole on the official tour."

Sunflower melted against Big Orca, pressing her lush curves against his chest. He gripped her bottom from behind, kneading her butt cheeks and spreading her legs to hold her against his groin. I felt my face turn bright red, and I watched, embarrassed and fascinated at the same time.

Sunflower turned and looked right at me. I bent my head, staring at the ground. Each pebble and blade of grass seemed outlined by light, and I cursed, feeling a fit coming on.

I gritted my teeth, trying to clamp down on the cascading sensations that threatened to overwhelm my consciousness. In my old village, the other children mocked my fits while their parents gave me a wide berth and tried to pretend to each other that I didn't exist.

Clarity threw a pebble at me, and I jumped when it bounced off the side of my head. It didn't hurt, but I rubbed my ear anyway. "What'd you do that for?" The nascent fit subsided, and I felt secretly relieved.

She opened her third eye again. "You're not injured." She shrugged and closed that eye, but kept her regular dark brown eyes fixed on me. Without her middle eye open, her scrutiny seemed less intense, friendlier.

"I should be helping my mother. I'm sure the overseer has duties for me." Big Orca and Sunflower's grunting and pushing against each other made me uncomfortable, and Lupe scared me. I wouldn't have minded talking with Clarity more, but maybe I'd get a chance later. I turned and started back across the field.

Lupe shook his head and extended his arm, blocking my way. "Big Orca won't like that." He shifted his weight forward and grinned. I got the funny feeling he wanted me to argue or make a break for it so he could chase me down.

Big Orca pinched Sunflower's left nipple through her thin top, and then came up for air. "Let's go." He grabbed my arm. "Don't worry, the overseer does what I want."

We followed a rutted road along the river through the fields, passing old men driving creaky donkey carts toward the village. They tipped their heads at Big Orca, but said nothing. The hot sun lay on the back of my neck like a brand, and my legs ached from the walking. A flock of tiny blackbirds exploded out of a potato field next to us with a sound like ripping cloth.

The road petered out against the start of the forest proper—trees so big around that twenty of us linking hands would have trouble circling one. Trunks towered skyward, cracks in their bark deep enough to swallow my whole arm, the first branches not starting for a stone's throw over my head. The river had narrowed and now rushed along between steep earthen banks. Cool air slipped from under the dark green canopy like a balm.

Big Orca led the way into the forest. Our steps softened as we moved under the trees, walking on a faint path over resilient moss and fallen evergreen needles. I kept a half-hearted eye out for a chance to head back home, but I knew I wouldn't find the right moment. I was committed, like it or not, to this crazy trip with companions I didn't know or trust, heading farther from civilization than I'd ever been before.

Sunflower followed Big Orca, staying close to his enormous back, while Lupe ranged off to the sides, appearing and disappearing when I least expected. Clarity fell into step beside me, her third eye almost glowing in the greenish forest light. "You've never imbibed."

My heartbeat quickened with fear and a trace of excitement. I'd heard about imbibing, of course, but I'd never known anyone who'd dared. "No."

Clarity turned her head and looked me full in the face. "That's where we're going. Big Orca likes it." Her third eye blinked, and I felt lost in its swirling colors.

Lupe spoke from behind my shoulder, making me jump. "You're the entertainment. I'm looking forward to seeing what imbibing does to you."

"No, thanks. I shouldn't. It's dangerous."

Lupe's breath felt hot against my shoulder. "Are you scared?"

"No straggling," Big Orca called back to us without stopping. I hurried to catch up, ducking under a fallen trunk held up by the snapped-off ends of branches larger than most other trees. I shivered as we moved deeper into the forest, hyper-alert, every sense on hair-trigger. Greenish shafts of sunlight filtered down from high above, illuminating floating dust motes. An unseen bird called a mournful lament, and a long black snake slithered across the path with a sinister rustle.

We walked till the sun was almost down and dark shadows filled the forest. I could barely see the ground in front of my feet, and my mouth felt as dry as a handful of dust. Big Orca stopped, and I looked up from the path. Reddish light and deep purple sky framed his enormous body. The forest, unbelievably, had ended. A sheer rock cliff dropped away from our feet and, for the first time in my life, I gazed upon the ocean that surrounded our island.

Of course I'd known the ocean wasn't actually water, but rather a vast network of intelligences that covered the entire planet save for our island. Enormous shapes seethed and pulsed, sending rainbow colors coruscating across the thick surface like oil spilled on oatmeal. Lacy snowflake towers appeared on the surface near us, building themselves higher and higher in a shifting construction that caught the light and sent it flashing over our faces.

Eyes appeared on extruded pseudopods, blinking and scanning the shore. As the towers approached the height of the bluff we stood on, they started shredding as if in a high wind, though all I felt was a gentle breeze. In minutes, nothing remained but house-sized lumps on the ocean's roiling surface.

Clarity gazed with wonder at the ocean, and I smiled, enjoying the shared moment. Lupe stepped between us. "I've never seen it so eager."

I leaned against the tree next to me but started in surprise when I realized the surface I touched wasn't bark. I stepped back and looked up. A cracked cement column, partially covered with moss and creeping vines, listed oceanward above me. A huge glass sphere shot through with gold and silver wires topped the pillar. "A guardian," I breathed.

"Not doing its job." Big Orca shot me a look from where he scrabbled under some fallen branches. "When my father was my age, you could hardly even see the ocean from here." He drew a bucket attached to a coil of rope out from under the branches.

Lupe grunted. "Better for us now, though."

Sunflower giggled. "Yeah."

I felt shocked. "But without them we'd be overrun."

Big Orca tossed the bucket over the edge and started lowering it down the side of the cliff. "Those are stories told to scare children, Beanpole. Besides, the other towers along this shore are in fine repair." He shrugged his shoulder toward an outcrop just visible from where we stood. The sphere atop another pillar flashed in the sunlight.

Clarity sidled toward me. "You're worried." It wasn't a question. She gazed at the tower for a long minute. "This guardian is weak, but stable."

Big Orca snorted. "Oh, I bet I could push it over." Thick yellow hemp rope slithered through his hands and over the drop, unwinding from the coil.

Sunflower squeezed his bicep. "You're so strong." Her bright white teeth flashed in a smile.

The rope finally played out, and Big Orca leaned over the edge before starting to pull it back up. "I got a good solid bucketful."

Lupe peeled a long strip of bark off a tree and shredded it with his fingernails. "You wouldn't believe what imbibing can do." His eyes bored into mine, and I looked away. I squeezed my clammy palms behind my back and tried not to shake.

Big Orca pulled the rope hand over hand, tireless as a machine. When the bucket finally came into view, he lifted the heavy container one handed and set it in a cleared space at the base of the guardian tower.

I peered in with the others. A thick soup of lumpy gray shapes filled the bottom half of the bucket. Shifting forms flickered and disappeared. Thread-thin tendrils reached up the sides and collapsed in furious disarray. "This is smart soup?"

"We cook it first." Sunflower laughed, a giddy, happy sound.

Big Orca sent Lupe and Clarity to scavenge dry wood while he made a tepee of twigs, fir needles, and dead, dry moss the color of the summer sun. I wanted to ask questions, but didn't want my ignorance to spark Big Orca's contempt. The fit I'd almost had earlier lurked behind my eyebrows, promising to appear right when I least would want it to.

Big Orca lit the fire from a pouch of slowburn on his belt, and soon the soup popped and crackled, like hot metal thrust into ice-cold water. Lumps and odd right-angled blocks appeared and disappeared on its surface. He stirred with a smooth stick, digging clumps from the bottom and watching them drip back into the bucket.

Clarity sat next to me on a worn log. "They'll lower you into the ocean on Name Day. Right off the edge of the naming platform."

"I know." My mother had told me the story of her Name Day as a ritual, and I knew it by heart. She'd been scared and exhilarated, fourth in line. The CEO had led her and the other pre-teens along the platform until they were surrounded on three sides by the ocean. One by one he'd dipped them in. The first child had grown wings. The next became a firestarter, while the third could sing like a bird. Then the CEO had blindfolded my mother and strapped her in a harness, murmuring reassuring words as he lowered her down. She said that entering the ocean was like a million spring crocuses asking her name, or eating a pie made of rainbows, or taking a shower in a baby's lullaby.

Everyone changed on their Name Day. My mother had grown gills and could breathe underwater, swimming in the lakes near our old village every free day. The CEO had named her Duala, for her dual nature. She said the ocean was alive, that it wanted us, gave us gifts, loved us. But if it were a person, we'd be like particles of skin or a single hair. The ocean was too big, too powerful for us.

The fifth child, a boy, had been transformed into a pulsating mass of half-formed tentacles and clumps of rubbery hair. He had only lived for a few minutes, gasping and retching on the platform. I could tell my mother's mood by how much she talked about the fifth child: if she mentioned the tragedy and then wrapped up the story, I knew she was in a good mood; if she dwelled on the details, talking about the scent of melting licorice that made everyone's eyes water, or described the way his mother had clutched her head and wailed, then I knew a melancholy had settled over her.

The story always ended the same way. She'd say, "And then, eight months later, you were born. The happiest day of my life."

I shifted on the log. The sun had gone down, and the cool forest air had turned chilly. "Will this be like Name Day?"

Clarity snorted. "The way a lovers' sigh is like a hurricane."

Big Orca stood and lifted the bucket off the fire. "It's ready." The soup had boiled down to a gray, sticky gruel, less than a cupped handful. He dipped his finger in, scooping up a hot translucent glob. "Sunflower?"

Sunflower also stood, stripping her clothes off in a few lithe motions. Her perfect body glowed reddish orange in the firelight. My gaze caught on her smooth, heavy breasts, areolas crinkled from the cool breeze. My breath stuck in my throat, and my pants felt too tight.

Big Orca touched her with his fingers, spreading soup into the skin of her forehead, shoulders, breasts, stomach, and thighs. He scooped a double finger-full of the soup and let it drip into his mouth, sucking his fingers when the flow faltered. "Here." He shoved the bucket toward me.

ANGRY AND HURT, I LASHED OUT AT THE FORCES IN CLARITY, REARRANGING HERE, ADDING THERE, LOSING MYSELF IN THE HEADY POWER OF CREATION AND DESTRUCTION, AS CARELESS AS A CHILD POKING STICKS AT ANTHILLS

"No, thanks." I held up my hand.

Big Orca towered over me, black frown clouding his face. "Imbibe."

I held Big Orca's gaze, heart thumping in my chest, but made no move to take the soup.

Lupe grabbed the bucket. "It'd be wasted on him anyway." He took a scoop, and then turned toward Clarity with a leer. Clarity's third eye snapped open, and her face took on an intensity that scared me. She took the bucket and scraped her finger around the inside with a greedy scratching sound. She brought her hand up to her face and her eye flashed and the iris spun. She closed her regular eyes and tipped her head, letting the goop drizzle directly onto her third eyeball.

Big Orca's muscles bulged even more, and he grew larger, splitting the soft weave of his shirt. Sunflower scrabbled with his pants, seemingly oblivious to my hungry gaze, and stripped the rest of his clothes from his still growing body. Big Orca towered head and shoulders above us, smooth hairless skin dappled with oblong black splotches.

Lupe shrugged out of his shirt, revealing an uneven pelt of black fur. His face lengthened, his nose and jaws turning snoutlike. A thick red tongue flicked out of his mouth and lolled over pointed teeth. He grabbed his crotch and moved toward Clarity. Her eye pulsed in time with my heartbeat, and then sent a blinding beam of light toward Lupe. I blinked and threw up my hand to shield my face. Clarity spoke with a contemptuous tone that made me shiver. "I'm no consort of yours, Lupe. Go fuck your hand if that's what you need."

I laughed. I didn't mean to, but I felt so uncomfortable that it just blurted out of me.

Lupe faced me, snarling. "You think that's funny, maggot?"

"No. I didn't mean—"

"You're dirt, worker boy." He swiped at my face with a hand turned paw, knocking me sideways and leaving fiery cuts down my cheek.

I stumbled backward, flailing my hands and searching in vain for the right words. Blood trickled down my face, and I touched my cheek. "You cut me."

"I'll do much more than that." Lupe leaped forward, grabbing my

arm and wrenching it behind my back. Pain flared through my shoulder as the joint dislocated. He threw me to the ground, and a dead branch scraped across my chest.

I covered my head with my good hand, tears of pain and frustration leaking from my eyes. "Stop." I tried to fight back, but Lupe held me down with his foot, grinding my face into the ground. He kicked my side, driving a wedge of agony into my left kidney. I tried to roll away, but he kicked me again, and I felt a rib crack. My whole world dissolved into pain, and I wondered if I would die. It wasn't fair. I just wanted to make some friends. I wished I'd never come.

"Shit, Lupe. You'll kill him." Clarity's eyebeam shone over my body and left floating yellow spots at the edges of my vision.

Lupe pulled me to my feet with my good arm. "That's right." Blood seeped over my eyes from a cut on my scalp, and waves of pain from my shoulder washed through me. I turned and vomited, every racking contraction clenching hurt muscles and sending jagged shards of agony from my fractured rib. Lupe released me with a snort of disgust, and I fell to my knees, one hand landing with a squelch in my own filth.

Clarity stepped toward Lupe. "We'll get in trouble." She turned to me and shone her eyebeam again. "The CEO traded away one of his best brood mares." I collapsed onto my good side. I felt flayed open, exposed. Twisting over, terrible pain lancing through my side, I tried to get my uncooperative legs underneath me so I could stand.

"Don't move." Clarity tipped the bucket over me. "This might heal you." Soup dripped onto my face, soaking into my skin and leaving a sticky residue that I touched with one exploratory finger. Lupe stalked around the fire, kicking dirt and leaves into the air and scowling.

My face turned warm and numb as if it had been swaddled in heated cotton. Tingles coursed through my body, muting the pain. Bright green light flashed all around me and the trees turned translucent and insubstantial. The waiting fit launched itself full force, and I was swept away, a leaf on a raging flash flood.

The layer of forest duff under my hands still felt prickly, and the pain of my injured shoulder throbbed through me, but threads and planes of colored light entwining through the gossamer tissue of ordinary matter caught most of my attention. My body seemed small and insignificant compared to the overwhelming sensations washing over me.

Clarity had become the focus of a thick skein of threads, and she flashed and sparked, her eyebeam the most substantial element of her existence. On the other side of a colorless, cold fire a flickering, blood-red knot of petulance hovered on the edge of the cliff, pacing back and forth, trailing dark shimmers of sparks. Big Orca and Sunflower had merged into a towering shower of solid, humming, white light. I could "see" the full influence of the ocean, the lines and forces that coursed through its physical manifestation as well as the bits and pieces inside Clarity and the others.

Above them the guardian sphere glowed with a sick black brilliance that hurt to look at. Friendly voices from the ocean filled me with warmth, chattering at the ragged edge of comprehension. A sense of purpose infused me, and I took a sideways look at the column supporting the sphere. A simple push and the tower would crumble into dust, sending the guardian crashing to the rocks below. It seemed so easy and natural. Patterns of thought flowed into me and I reached into the material world to do what the ocean desired.

Clarity's eyebeam skewered me from an impossible distance, and I snapped back into myself, resentful at my pain-filled little existence. She spoke words and slapped my face. Angry and hurt, I lashed out at the forces in Clarity, rearranging here, adding there, losing myself in the heady power of creation and destruction. As careless as a child poking sticks at anthills.

I spent the next days or weeks in an extended fit, drooling and shaking. The worst fit of my life. My mother fed me broth, dabbing at my chin with a damp cloth. I drifted in and out of raging nightmares, hungry dreams that threatened to consume everything I knew.

One morning, the fit finally subsided. I woke to my mother's concerned face, the red slits of her gills opening and closing in time with her breathing. She stroked my cheek. "Noodle? Are you truly awake?" Tears lay poised at the corners of her red and puffy eyes, and her black hair, ordinarily never out of its customary braid, made a disheveled cloud around her face. "It's Name Day."

I blinked and wiped at my tired face. "I know." A sliver of awareness inside me had tracked the days, bringing me to full consciousness at the proper time. The cuts on my cheek had healed, but my left shoulder and rib were still deep knots of pain.

Weak dawn sunlight glimmered through the high, small window that ran along the top of the back wall in our new house. It wasn't designed for a view, but if it got hot, we could open it to create a draft. Mother must have been busy; the glass sparkled, the earthen walls around me gleamed with a fresh coat of oil, and the cobwebs and mouse droppings had been swept away. "I'm sorry." And I did feel sorry. My love for my mother washed through me in a great gasping wave and tears pushed at the corners of my eyes.

Mother hushed me and pressed a hot cup of tea into my hands. "It doesn't matter. I'm glad you woke up." She hugged me, almost spilling tea onto the bed. "I was so worried. They said you had a nasty fall." She sat back and pasted a smile on her face. "It's your Name Day. I'm so proud."

I pried myself out of bed, and finding I had an appetite, ate a breakfast of scrambled eggs and smoked trout, shoveling food into my ravenous body as fast as Mother brought it to me. I rolled the possibilities around in my mind. Clarity and the others must have lied. Imbibing was serious business, against all the rules. I felt sick with guilt, a terrible gnawing feeling that I couldn't take back what I'd done.

THE DELICATE THREADS OF LIGHT I'D SEEN WHEN IMBIBING BEFORE WERE NOW THIGH-THICK BOLTS OF PURE ENERGY. THEIR BRILLIANCE DAZZLED ME, AND THE WORLD OF MATTER BLINKED OUT OF EXISTENCE

Outside our tiny house, the morning noises of the awakening village got louder. Other families had clearly finished their Name Day breakfast feasts and were gathering for the journey to the naming platform. In our old village, younger brothers and sisters would have bedecked every cart in town with chains of flowers, while sophisticated older siblings would brag with their friends about how brave they'd been on their Name Days.

I finished my food and my mother pressed a carved wooden trout into my hand. Tiny translucent pearls winked at me from its eye sockets. The guilt started up again, hammering at me with caustic insistency. "How beautiful." I didn't deserve it.

"I made it for you. A Name Day token." She stood up. "We should go. You'll want a good place on one of the carts."

We pushed our door open. Sequoia, one of the CEO's guards, stood rooted on our doorstep. His thick brown skin looked impervious. "You're to stay indoors with your child, ma'am." His voice sounded like tree branches scraping in the wind. "Direct orders from the CEO. Your son was imbibing. Putting the whole village at risk." He shut the door in our faces.

I felt empty inside as my mother turned her stunned, disbelieving face toward me. "Noodle?"

"I didn't fall." I blurted out the whole story, like lancing a boil. I

wondered with sick relief how the CEO had found out the truth.

My mother's face shifted from hurt to outrage when I described my pummeling at Lupe's hands. She threw the door open and stood, arms akimbo, glaring up at Sequoia's passive face. "This isn't right. Every child deserves a Name Day. It's not his fault. What about the others?"

Clarity chose that moment to walk past our house. She turned her face toward us. Her third eye flashed open, and then other eyes of all shapes and sizes across her forehead and face blinked open as well. "Noodle."

"Clarity." I didn't know what else to say. Memories of her energy lines and my meddling flooded through me. I was sure I'd instigated these changes.

My mother addressed me. "Is this one of your so-called friends?" Without waiting for my answer, she poked her head past Sequoia's sturdy body and yelled at Clarity's retreating back. "You said he fell!"

Clarity stopped and turned around. She cocked her hips and jutted her chin forward. "We lied. Your son's a menace. Look at me." Her eyes flashed open and speared me with their accusatory gaze. "I can't see anymore. Whatever your son is, he's wrecked my life."

I wanted to talk with her, explain that I didn't mean any harm. Maybe I could fix—

Sequoia pushed me and my mother back inside. "The CEO is protecting the village." He shut the door again, but this time leaned his full weight across the jamb.

"It's not right." My mother paced back and forth in front of me, twisting her shawl in her hands. "On my Name Day, my mother dressed me in blue and pink, not letting me do so much as a single button by myself."

"I know."

"I was fourth in line. An honorable place." Her fingers twisted the shawl so tightly the yarn seemed embedded in her skin.

"Mother."

"Listen." She shot me a look so filled with naked longing and impotent grief that I quelled any further disruptions. She finished the story in a rush, talking over the sounds of children running in the street, parents laughing, and the clop of cart horses pulling loaded wagons. Her description of the flailing tentacles and deliquescing flesh of the fifth boy gave me shivers. "Where exactly did you get the soup?" She leaned on the table, her elbow slipping unheeded into the dirty dishes.

I described the path and the river. She nodded, her lips thinning with determination, and then straightened up, her spine stiff as a pole, gills flaring at her neck.

She grabbed my uninjured arm and dragged me to the back wall. She made a stirrup of her hands and boosted me to the window sill. I pushed the glass open and wedged my head and one shoulder through. "I can do it." I bit my lip against the pain and wriggled and pushed, finally toppling face first into the rough grass and weeds behind our house. Agony lanced through my shoulder, and I choked back a scream.

My mother's face appeared at the window, and she slithered through, turning and landing lightly on the ground next to me. "Hurry," she hissed into my ear and took my hand, levering me to my feet.

We dodged behind houses, running next to walls, wary as mice in a kitchen with a hungry cat. When I turned to follow the path to the forest, my mother shook her head and set off for a farmer's hut near the river. I lagged behind, limping and feeling nauseous from the inevitable joggling of my shoulder and side.

"Get in." My mother undid the rope securing a small rowboat and gestured me to the seat. I'd never seen her so sure of herself before. All the constraints of her worker life had fallen away. She slipped off her clothes and made a bundle that she wedged in the bow. The tiny scales on her skin glowed, reflecting rainbow sparkles from the sunlight.

I climbed aboard, the boat rocking under my weight, and sat down. My mother tied the rope into a harness around her body and dived into the water with a soft splash. She swam under the surface and the rope pulled taut, jerking the boat forward. Determination beat a steady rhythm in me as well. I could feel changes that had started in me already and knew they would leave me twisted and unfulfilled if I didn't see them through. I sculled with my good arm, pushing the paddle side to side in the water, contributing the most I could to our progress.

We made good speed upriver. My mother always seemed to know where the slack water was, and we avoided fighting the main current. Fields slipped away on either side, and by noon we reached the forest. The cool air felt even colder on the water, and I yearned for a jacket. I snorted at myself, wishing for such a mundane thing.

The river grew smaller but more powerful, and the boat scraped on submerged rocks. We finally beached downstream of a waist-high waterfall. My mother tied the boat off, shook her clothes out, and dressed on a flat rock. "Where's the path?"

I cast around for the route Big Orca had followed before, and felt a strong rush of pride when I found the faint signs. "This way." I led us through the trees until the air lightened and the ocean was visible. The gray shapes seethed and twisted as before, but today I could read faint flashes of meaning in their effervescent constructions.

My mother sucked in her breath, taking in the cliff, the firepit, and the guardian tower in a few quick glances. The bucket lay on its side near where Lupe had attacked me. My mother pushed the fallen branches aside, exposing hastily piled rope. She tied the bucket off, and without saying a word, dropped it over the cliff.

I watched, once again, as the yellow hemp snaked over the edge of the rock. But this time my mother's grim, determined face made a sharp contrast to my memory of Big Orca's smug smile. I helped untangle the rope, feeding it to her in a smooth rhythm.

The bucket reached its limit, and my mother peered over the side, swinging it back and forth until she had scooped up some ocean. We hauled with all our strength, my mother pinning the rope with her feet when we needed to get a new grip. My hurt shoulder and side ached, but my good arm made a difference. The slack rope piled behind us into an untidy sprawl. When the bucket reached the top, my mother pulled extra hard, almost overbalancing, and then grabbed the handle. Gray tendrils poked over the metal side making strange popping noises.

A bush rustled behind me and Lupe stepped into view. "Clarity thought you'd be here." His fur was disheveled, and crumbs from breakfast quivered at the edge of his mouth.

Big Orca strode into the clearing with Sunflower out of breath on his arm. "Disobeying an order, Beanpole?" He shook his head and clicked his tongue. "We could get in trouble if my dad found out we'd also been imbibing. He doesn't like it."

Clarity arrived, frazzled and jumpy, her eyes scanning the forest around us. She addressed my mother. "You can't do this. I want my eye back."

Big Orca moved toward us, reaching out his large hand for the rope.

My mother sidestepped and threw the contents of the bucket at me. A sheet of gray goop enveloped my head, wrapping around my face and sending questing tentacles down my side and under the collar of my shirt. I opened my mouth to scream, and more tentacles thrust their way inside. They tasted oily, and then like chocolate. The goop covered my eyes, but a new sense inside me awoke and revealed my surroundings as shifting lights and lines of color.

"You bitch." Lupe jumped forward and punched my mother in the stomach. His body looked like knots of red light connected by glowing strands. My mother stumbled backward, tangling her legs in the rope, and then tripped and fell, sliding off the edge of the cliff. Her scream sounded faint and muffled by the goop on my head, but my sense of her stayed clear as she fell and fell, finally plunging into a pulsing mass of shifting shapes that ripped her apart, incorporating her essence into their design.

"No, no, no," I yelled. Fireworks lit up inside me. "Mother!" I ran to the edge and tried to make sense of the scene before me.

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Sand Castles

BY DESIRINA BOSKOVICH • ILLUSTRATION BY NATALIA PIERANDREI

Sometimes you can want to believe in something so much you can almost make it true. Almost.

Radley calls me one morning in June. He says he's flying into Pensacola that night and he wants to know if I can pick him up. He says there's a girl with him. They need a ride from the airport. And maybe a place to crash.

"Sure," I say. I haven't seen Radley since a month ago, when we graduated from the art institute, packed up our stuff, and moved out. I kind of miss him. And I'm curious about this girl.

I pick them up at the airport. We drop off their suitcases at my dad's place, where I'm crashing for the summer. By now it's late, so we head to the bar.

The girl's name is Audra. Her hair is strawberry blonde, hanging in thin strands around her face. I've never seen anyone with eyes quite that color before—a pale green. Her skin is pale, too, and lightly freckled. Delicate features, pointy chin. She's wearing a pastel green long-sleeved shirt, loose khakis, and a hemp necklace that she made herself. She has too many earrings.

I can't decide if I like her or not.

Radley is the same as always: disheveled, relaxed, oddly focused. There's this anticipant glow in his blue eyes. His clothes are tattered and splattered with dribbles of paint. His dark dreadlocks are longer than ever, and he smells like pot. He always smells like pot.

"Welcome to Pensacola," I say. Pensacola is a tacky tourist trap and it doesn't feel like home. I sip my drink, waiting for them to tell me what they're doing here.

"Yeah, Pensacola's great," Radley says. "Just great." He gulps his margarita and gazes around the bar. It's dark and glitzy, the walls littered with leis and toucans. "Interesting use of the palm tree motif," he says. He isn't being sarcastic. "So what you been up to, Nat?"

"Well, not much, really," I say. "You know. Staying with my Dad while I look for a job." I'm not actually looking for a job. After that terrible interview last week, I decided to put the job search on hold.

"Cool ..." he says. "Uh, so, gone on any interviews yet?"

"A couple," I say. Three, actually. Each one of them worse than the last. "Office jobs."

"So how did they go?"

"Okay, I guess." As in, there were no explosions, or untimely deaths.

"Like, did you get it?"

"I'm still waiting to hear back." Actually, I could care less if I ever hear back.

"Good luck with that," Radley says. "If, I mean, that's what you really want."

It's not what I really want, but it's life. It's the way life works.

"Uh, yeah," I say. "So what brings you to Pensacola?"

"We're on a journey," Radley says.

"We have a map," Audra says. She speaks quietly, barely above a whisper, but I have no trouble hearing her, even in the noisy bar.

There's an easy intimacy between us, the kind of familiarity that comes from sitting in a hot car for eleven hours, crossing three state lines together, finding our way into small talk ...

"Yeah," Radley says. "We have a map."

"But what we don't have ..."

"Is a car," Radley finishes.

I'm amused, but not surprised. Freaking artists—this is about all you can expect from them. "So exactly where is this map leading you?" I ask.

"Somewhere on the Gulf of Mexico," Audra says. "A beach."

"There's one outside, you know."

"We need this particular beach. Because of the sand," Radley says.

"What?"

"Because we need it," Audra says. And they won't say anything more.

Two drinks later, they still haven't told me why. Pop hits play loud on the speakers and the room gets a little fuzzier; my drinks are too sweet, a succession of fruity fantasies. There are girls, in miniskirts and wife-beaters, flipping their cell phones open and talking too loudly. A waitress comes by and flirts with me; she's tall and hollow-cheeked with a fountain of blonde hair like a species of tropical bird. She leans in close, but I just shrug away. The whole time I can feel Radley and Audra watching me carefully.

We sit there for a while, drinking. Neither one says anything about why they need the sand, so I start guessing. "You want to make sand art with it?"

"Sort of," Audra says, crossing her narrow wrists on the table in front of her. She's wearing hemp bracelets, too, threaded with tiny white shells. I've figured her out: she's a jewelry maker. And fashion designer on the side. That pink sash threaded through her belt loops? She made it herself.

It's dark outside, but still hot. Humidity crawls inside, fogs the drinking glasses. Which gives me an idea. "You want to melt it into glass?"

Audra stares at me over the rim of her strawberry daiquiri, the corners of her mouth crinkling with the hint of a smile. Radley is destroying napkins: ripping them into shreds, dipping them in his drink, and molding the paste into miniature sculptures.

"You want to bury yourself alive," I guess. "You want to build an hourglass?"

No one is telling me anything, even though they obviously want something from me, so I just keep drinking. The hollow-cheeked waitress has lost interest, but I don't care. She wasn't my type.

"You need to exfoliate with it?"

Audra's lips are chapped. I try not to wonder why. How long have she and Radley known each other? I can't remember seeing them together when we were at school. Even though Radley always had girls around him; something about him drew them, like hipsters swarming to a dirty coffee shop. Probably had something to do with his effortless talent, his magnetic passion and drive. And his lack of sustained interest in any of them. Some of those girls were crazy about him, but he never got involved. Maybe he had other things to care about, or maybe he just didn't know how.

Audra seems different. She's not intimidated by him. And he listens when she talks.

"You want to make a sandbox. You want to throw it in people's eyes."

Audra actually laughs. "You're getting close."

I can't help but feel self-satisfied that I've made her laugh. I can't compete with Radley's magnetic personality, but at least I make girls laugh.

I'm out of ideas and too drunk to be clever anymore, so I go for the obvious. "You want to build sand castles," I say.

Audra smiles. "So will you drive?"

At home, I build a plush foundation of sheets and blankets on my dad's living room floor, and spread sleeping bags on top. Those are for Radley and me. I let Audra have my bed.

We tiptoe upstairs, speaking in whispers so we don't wake up my dad. I show her my bedroom. She stands in the middle of the room, gazing at the walls: the half-finished sketches and immature drawings, the posters from *Pulp Fiction* and Dave Mathews Band, the concert ticket stubs pinned to the corkboard as mementos. "This was your room when you were a child," she says.

"Only in the summertime. When I used to stay with my dad."

"I love it," she says. "Did you draw those?"

"Yeah," I say. "A long time ago."

"I want to see more," she says. She yanks down the sheets and blankets on my bed and lies down. Before I can say anything else, she stretches, yawns, and falls asleep instantly. I watch her for a moment, noticing the way her hair fans out across my plaid pillowcase. Then I feel guilty for watching her while she sleeps, so I close the door.

Radley is waiting for me in the living room. "Nice house," he says.

"Thanks," I say. "It's my dad's." I feel embarrassed, like I should apologize. It's so spacious and clean and suburban. Nothing like the messy apartment we lived in together, with crumbling plaster and creaking floorboards and thrift store couches; dirty dishes on all the counters, stoned roommates on all the furniture. My life is a lot different now, but I figure his life is exactly the same.

"So," I say. "Audra. What's up with you guys? Like, you know."

"Nothing," he says. "We're just friends. Just friends taking a road trip together."

"But, you know. Do you like her?"

"Of course I like her," he says. "We're friends."

I figure he's not going to say anything else, but I know him well enough to draw my own conclusions. Of course he likes her.

He stretches out, left arm thrown out comfortably, eyes half-closed.

"So," I say, trying to get all my questions in fast. Drinking always

makes him sleepy, not chatty. "What about the beach, then? Why do you really want to go there? You guys are just fooling with me, right? You just want to go on vacation in Mexico."

Radley opens one eye and regards me lazily. "There's this myth," he says.

"What? What is it?"

"A magic city. Underwater. It's ... the sand ... it's ..."

"And you think we're going there?"

He doesn't say anything for a while, and I have the idea that he's preparing a reasoned argument or clever retort. But then he emits a soft snore, and I realize he's fallen asleep.

In the morning, we stumble around my dad's kitchen, while the morning sunshine drenches the terra cotta tiles in warmth. My dad meanders in, wearing a ratty bathrobe. Beneath the hem his calves are deeply tanned, fuzzy with wild tufts of gray hair. He makes himself a bowl of bean sprouts and tofu chunks, drizzled with soy sauce. I introduce him to Radley and Audra. He holds Audra's hand for a long time when he shakes it, which I don't like. It's embarrassing. "We're going on a road trip," I tell him.

"Where?" he asks, munching bean sprouts, checking out Audra.

"Oh, to the beach," I say vaguely. The details of our conversation last night are a little hazy; I don't actually remember.

"Awesome," he says. For my dad, it's all about the beach. For a fleeting moment, I think I see Radley's future, but it makes me too depressed, so I do my best to forget it. I get a glass out of the cabinet and pour Audra orange juice.

I don't find out where we're going until we're outside, packing up the car, hefting our backpacks and sleeping bags into the back of my beat-up Volvo station wagon. Audra pulls out the map, and she and Radley inspect it, leaning casually against the front grill of the car. It's only ten thirty in the morning, but already the sun is blazing and the air is steamy. Beads of sweat are sticking to my forehead. It smells swampy and salty; it smells like hot pavement. The constant noises of crashing surf and sluggish traffic harmonize relentlessly.

"By the way," Radley says. "We may have to cross the border. Do you have your birth certificate handy?"

"Um," I say, and find it eventually, in the dusty back drawer of a forgotten file cabinet in my dad's kitchen.

We drive all day on I-10, skating the edge of the Gulf. We cross the endless bridge into Mobile; the water ripples away on each side, stippled blue, the highway suspended over it for miles. Watching it, everyone grows quiet. We cross into Louisiana, veer away from the Gulf for a while, and the scenery becomes murky and verdant, with that rotting vegetable smell and swampy dankness clinging to everything. In Texas things become dry beige again—the emptiness of glittering pavement and dry prairies. Audra looks out the window a lot and doesn't say much. I wonder what she's thinking.

We trade off driving, taking shifts. Radley talks about his theories on how to save the world. His most recent one has to do with parks. He came up with this a couple months ago, when we were still roommates, so I've already heard it. From the look on her face, Audra has too.

"I'm just saying, man," he says. "We need more parks. Parks. Humans aren't meant to survive in ... this." He gestures out the window, to the wasteland of strip malls and burnt asphalt that is Texas. "If the human race had a little more green space, some places to relax, everyone would be, like, a little more chill."

"Don't you think maybe the problems go a little deeper than that?"

"But maybe they don't," Radley says, naïvely faithful, like some post-modern prophet of parks.

"What about Sudan?" I say. "What about the Middle East? What about all the wars that have been going on for centuries?"

"You notice they don't have very many parks in those places," he says.

"Stop arguing, boys," Audra says, but like most kids trapped on a long car ride, we just can't help it.

"Don't you think that parks are a kind of Euro-centric concept?" I ask innocently.

"No! Everyone loves parks," Radley says. "I read some studies about it. Little kids who grow up around parks are like, 82 percent more likely to be happy and well-adjusted and everything. I totally just made that statistic up, but you know, you get the point."

I argue for a while, but then I give up. Radley is so confidently, frustratingly self-assured. And he keeps countering my arguments with sad stories about little kids who live in the inner city and don't have anywhere to play because the streets are filled with contaminated needles and broken glass. More parks might not solve everything, but I figure they wouldn't hurt, either.

Just outside of Houston we get off I-10 and head toward the coast. We decide to stay the night in Galveston, on the beach. We drive up the strip for a little while, looking at the stacks of hotels, the neon lights, the handwritten signs, the girls in their bikinis and skirts. We stop at the cheapest motel we can find.

The motel room is cold and damp inside, cloying humidity creeping in from the ocean and magnified by the panting air conditioner. The air is choked with the odor of stale cigarette smoke. There are two double beds, bedspreads printed in bright flowers of splashed puke. The plaster on the walls is crumbling. The bathroom floor is missing tiles. The faucet is being colonized by black mold. There is no clock radio.

I figure Radley and Audra must feel right at home.

We order takeout and sit on the floor cross-legged, passing around cartons of sesame chicken and broccoli beef. We steal each other's food and squabble quietly over the fourth egg roll.

After dinner, Radley stretches out on the bed and starts rolling a joint from the small Ziploc bag in his pocket. "How did you get that on the airplane?" I ask. He gleefully tells me about his special technique: fat condom packed with weed, submerged in a full shampoo bottle.

The television has only three channels, all of them blurry. Darkness is falling outside and it's finally cooling down, so Audra and I decide to go for a walk. There's a convenience store nearby, so we stop in and grab a pack of beers and head down to the beach.

There's an easy intimacy between us, the kind of familiarity that comes from sitting in a hot car for eleven hours, crossing three state lines together, finding our way into small talk, liking the same songs. We walk the steps down to the beach and kick off our sandals in the hillocks of white sand. "They'll be here when we get back," I say, even though Audra doesn't seem concerned.

The sky shimmers periwinkle blue, the last shade before dark. Light from the hotels and crab shacks spills onto the sand, but the ocean is an infinite void. That's one of the things that always surprises me about the ocean: how dark it is at night. The sand is still warm on our feet. Couples sit holding hands, and a few families are packing up their beach towels and whining kids. I feel content: tired and full, with a cold beer in my right hand and four more dangling from my left.

There's just one thing. "So when are you guys going to tell me what's going on?" I ask.

"Soon," Audra says. "Come on, where's your sense of adventure?"

Just this morning I was sitting in my Dad's kitchen in Pensacola, looking sadly at his hairy ankles, and now I'm walking down the beach in Galveston, Texas. And I have no idea where I'm going. "You know, I'd say that my sense of adventure is functioning fine."

"I know. I didn't think you'd want to go, but Radley said you would."

"Yeah. I didn't really buy his story about just happening to catch a cheap flight into Pensacola, and then just happening to remember that I lived there."

She laughs a little and takes another sip of her beer. "I could tell you didn't. Radley's got lots of talents, but lying isn't one of them."

We're quiet for a few moments. The surf laps gently on the beach, filling in the gaps.

"I'm glad you came," she says. She tucks her hair behind her ears.

"Me too." I think about what to say next. "I didn't have much else

to do, though. Since I got done with art school I've been feeling kind of lost."

"I know how that feels."

She doesn't offer anything else, so I keep talking. "I'm not really sure what I want to do now. I thought I loved making art, but I really just loved looking at it."

"Do you still draw?"

"Sometimes. Small sketches, in my notebooks. Cartoons."

"Oh," she says. "The drawings in your bedroom. I forgot about those. They were really good."

"Not really," I shrug. I know she's just being nice. "I just draw for myself, now. Maybe a couple other people."

"People you want to say something special to?"

I don't know what to say, so I just shrug again. Then change the subject. "I remember Radley's first gallery show, end of junior year. Walking around the gallery, seeing all those people. Seeing the way they looked at him." And a girl, in a slim black dress and heels, who reached out with one finger to trace the outline of a sculpture. Her index finger hovered in the air, following the pull of an invisible line. This is the memory that's the clearest to me, but I don't tell Audra that part.

"Anyway," I continue. "That's when I realized. That Radley was the real deal. And then I began to realize that I wasn't." It's just part of going to art school. Figuring out who's serious, and who isn't. Radley has a way with ceramics and clay, and other things that can be squished, shaped, and sculpted; his hands understand the material world too easily, as if he is more a part of it than the rest of us.

"And you envy him," Audra says.

"No," I say. "I don't envy him. He's too nice. And he still has this idea that his art is going to change the world."

"Maybe it will," Audra says.

I cast a quick, anxious glance at her—is she in love with him, like all the others? But she drops her eyes and looks away. "Nothing, never mind," she says, even though I haven't said anything.

There's a moment of awkward silence until she changes the subject. "So where is your mother?"

It's a rude question, I think, but I don't care. "She lives in New Jersey. I used to live there too. I just stayed with my dad in the summers. Guess I'm still kind of in the habit."

"Yeah," Audra says. She's finished her beer. I take the empty can from her and toss it, along with my own, into one of the big trashcans at the edge of the beach. We start two more.

"What about you?" I ask. "Where are your parents?"

She hesitates. "I lost them," she says. "My mom and I emigrated together and left my dad behind. We went from city to city for a while, but a few years ago I lost her. Since then, I haven't been able to find my way back home."

I'm not an artist, and I know that now. I don't really know what my talents are, but I know one of them: I have always been good at discovering things that need love, and then figuring out how to love them. I reach out and take her hand. She doesn't acknowledge my hand squeezing hers, but she doesn't pull away.

"All my life," she says. "I've been homesick for this place that I barely even remember anymore."

I know exactly what she means.

"I miss her," Audra whispers.

It's dark now. We drift toward the surf. At the water's edge, Audra seems to come alive; she appears more colorful, as if tinted with a richer palette. The moonlight is drawn to the pale loveliness of her face, and the light gleams on the bits of shell and metal threaded into her necklace. She smells like saltwater taffy. Looking into her eyes, I feel like I'm underwater—dazed and sluggish, my movements clumsy. I want her. Badly.

I reach out a hand and brush the silvery-light hair away from her face, resting my fingers against her cheek. She doesn't pull away. Experimentally, I lean in and brush my lips across hers. Then kiss her, and she kisses back. She tastes salty-sweet, just like she smells.

We walk home in silence, holding hands. When we get home, Radley is half-asleep already and the TV is on low, and no one has very much to say.

The next morning, we get up early. Too early. It's still cool outside when we pack up again, check in our keys, and say goodbye to the musty motel room. Radley eyes Audra and me speculatively. Things have changed, and he knows. But he doesn't say anything about it. Just takes the back seat and lets me have the first driving shift.

We drive through Texas. It takes a long time. Texas never ends.

Six hours later, we're starving, and we're about to cross the border. We stop for lunch, then go for it. I've never been across the border before, so I'm nervous, but Radley says it will be no big deal.

We wait in the line, stop and start, following the lead of the changing lights. The guard comes and checks us out, looks at our papers, checks the back of the car. There's some problem with Audra's papers. I'm not exactly sure what it is. Audra and Radley and the guard stand outside on the concrete and talk and gesture for a while, and I sit inside the hot car, waiting. getting hotter. I can't hear what they're saying, but I can tell that Audra is flirting with the guard, pursing her lips and tucking tendrils of hair behind her ears. I wish I was out there.

The guard seems to relent, but then offers a word of warning. Radley and Audra nod and agree. I'm watching a silent movie with no subtitles, wondering what's going on.

They get back in the car. "We're good," Radley says.

"They're letting her through?"

"Yeah," Audra says.

"Are they going to let her back in again?" I ask, as if I'm joking, even though I'm not. Everyone knows that it's easier to get into Mexico than out of it.

"I'm not worried," Audra says.

So we drive.

On the other side, everything is different. Buildings are made of concrete and painted in Easter egg pastels, signs splashed with phrases in Spanish. People stand on the streets, talking to one another, laughing, not going anywhere in particular. Driving is different, more chaotic: the rules are less defined. Once I figure that out and learn to go with the flow, the driving becomes easier, except for those fleeting moments of sheer terror.

The roads quickly disappear. The town fades away into wilderness. The road fades away into dirt. We're lost, and none of us has ever been lost like this before. The narrow, fading roads have no signs, and everything looks the same. Dusty terrain, dry brush, cottages patched together out of cardboard and plywood, threadbare like used quilts.

I pull over, where the side of the road would be, if there was a road. Audra and Radley put away the faded Gulf Coast map they've been using, and from a pocket in his bag, Radley pulls out a new map. It's rolled up like a poster, with a ribbon tied around the middle. He unrolls it, and I see that it's small, about the size of a placemat.

Radley and Audra lean their heads closer together and inspect the map, caressing its tattered corners. I lean in, too, vibrantly aware of Audra's shoulder touching mine, her fingers stroking the map.

The map is old, and strange. It's made out of a soft, flexible material like sheepskin, the corners dog-eared and parts worn thin, but still strong. The delicate surface is hand-painted, inked in wide and flowing brushstrokes in vivid colors ... streaks of red, black, and green. I can make out the Gulf, but everything else is fuzzy. There are dozens of tiny roads inked on, all leading to miniature beaches. On the map, the beaches show up as small voids, the peachy tan of softened leather.

Radley meets my eyes, awkwardly. "So the map's sort of confusing," he says.

"Where did you find this?"

"In the library," he said. "In the antique books section. I just came across it."

When he's at the library, Radley always heads for the section with

the oldest books first. I imagine it's because the ancient texts smell fragrant and musty, like his clothes, the fibers laden with years of smoke and not enough trips through the laundry. Or maybe it's because the antique books are more material, existing for the physical fact of themselves, and not the information inside them. Concrete and corporeal objects, like his sculptures, taking up space in their own special way.

Radley touches the map with his index finger, trying to trace his way down the Mexican coast. "So I had this map. And then I found Audra. She was looking for the map too, and she knew how to read it."

Audra interrupts. "We'll just have to orient ourselves with the sun until we can find a road that looks right," she says, curtly. "Nat, just stay as close to the coast as you can." I wonder why she doesn't want to talk about the map, but I don't say anything.

So we keep driving, through a chalky landscape, dry brush and prickly weeds washed in gray. Startled jackrabbits leap away from the noise of the car. The dirt road is covered with beige spots, and I realize after a stop that the spots are the flattened carcasses of dead toads, eroded to papery skins. We pass only a few villages, and see almost no one. The whole world seems flat and dreary, almost a dream. Maybe that's why Audra starts telling the story she does. She's staring out the window, a distant expression on her face; as I drive I sneak glances at her, to see the shadowplay of a smile at the corners of her mouth.

She crosses her legs, folds her hands in her lap, and clears her throat, as if to get our attention.

"Once upon a time, in the fading days of the last epoch ... there lived a race of people who were unique, different from all the others. They devoted their energies to building palaces, when others were making war. And these palaces were glorious. Crafted from pink quartz, a mineral that was plentiful in those days, but has since almost completely disappeared."

"Safe in its bubble, the city was swallowed by the waves. Millennia have passed now, and they've perfected their magic and machines. And the bubble is stronger than ever."

Her voice is lyrical, almost a chant. Is she making this up as she goes, or reciting a story learned by heart?

"These people, they devised clever technologies. They found ways to shield their castles from the harshness of the sun and the ravages of the rain."

I decide this must be a story that she's memorized. She would never use a phrase like that on her own.

"They were beautiful and wise, but the gods were jealous. This race was too much like themselves. In revenge, the gods shifted the oceans, so that the waves would come rolling in and devour the castles."

I listen, so lulled by the sound of her voice that I'm not even aware of the sage brush and toad skins. And then I remember—this is the myth, the one Radley mentioned earlier, after we got home from the bar. Before he passed out.

"But the people outsmarted the gods, through cleverness or magic. They brought their people together and blew a bubble that encompassed the city. It quivered, but it did not break. Safe in its bubble, the city was swallowed by the waves. Millennia have passed now, and they've perfected their magic and machines. And the bubble is stronger than ever."

What does this story mean to her, I wonder. Is it just a children's story? Is it an allegory, some kind of parable for modern-day existence? Does she think it's real?

I don't know, but I still want to hear more. So I pull the car over, get out, and make Radley drive instead. He's already heard this story, I think. He drives for a while, slouching in the driver's seat, his eyes half-closed. I listen to Audra, watching the way her mouth moves, the creases around her eyes when she smiles, the way her eyes flutter upward when she's trying to remember the details.

"You should see the palaces," she says. "A sprawl, a tangle, of courtyards and turrets and staircases. Glimmering walls. Gardens of grasses, seaweed blooming year round in the murky ocean light." She pauses, as if searching for a new image. "We walk on paths of pale sand, like sugar. We wear necklaces of seaweed and shells."

I start to think that Audra might be a little insane. Perversely, it only makes me want her more.

Radley straightens a little, speaks up. "It's hard to find this city, even when you're looking for it," he says, confidently, and for some reason I feel a little pissed off. "It's part of the magic. But every now and then, a diver who allows his heart to accept wonder will make it down there. And be welcomed. Sometimes they send their scouts up to the top, to explore the world, and bring back novelties to recreate."

"Yeah," Audra says. She pauses for a moment. "Some of those people never come back. It has always been this way, and it will always be this way. It is the way it should be." But I hear the break in her voice. She doesn't sound so convinced.

Everyone is silent for a while. Alone in the back seat, I stare out the window: at the bizarre landscape, so unlike anything we've ever imagined. It's otherworldly in its simplicity and bareness. Audra might be crazy. She probably is. But here, in this brief fantastic moment, it's not so impossible to believe in the existence of other worlds.

And I want to believe, just like they do. We all desperately want to believe.

The sun sinks toward the horizon and the landscape is washed in dusty pink. The day ends sooner here, and that adds to the strangeness, the feeling of being lost in time.

We don't find our beach that night. We don't have any pesos, so we end up sleeping in the car, and for a while I'm terrified, but then I realize there's no one for miles around. There are scorpions, though; a dead scorpion falls out of the bottom of our bag of snacks when I empty the last of our stash onto the hood of the car. It must have crawled in there on one of our stops. I scream like a girl and Radley and Audra both laugh.

Before we sleep, we sit outside for a while and stare up at the stars, brighter than we've ever seen them before. They seem so big, close enough to reach out and touch, and I get a brief glimpse of how different life must have been a century ago, before our skies were polluted with false light.

"I wonder when we'll find our beach," Radley says.

"Soon," Audra says. "Tomorrow, maybe. Probably."

"So what are we looking for, anyway?" I ask. "Buried treasure, right?" I'm just kidding. That's so not Radley. He doesn't care about stuff like that.

But Radley glances at me seriously, and then shrugs. "The palaces. Some of the sand washes up from below. And it still has some of the magic, you know? So there's this legend. If you search for the beach with nothing but pure love in your heart, you'll be able to sculpt from the sand the thing you most desire. And it will come true."

I almost laugh, but then I don't. Radley is as serious as a six-year-old. "So what do you most desire?" I ask.

"To make something that matters," he says. "That will actually change the world."

"What about you, Audra?"

"I just want to go home," she says.

I wait for someone to ask me what it is I most desire, but no one does. I'm relieved. Because I'm not sure I know.

In the darkness I reach for Audra's hand. All I want to do is sneak off into the desert with her and be alone. I feel a little guilty; I know that Radley feels something for her. Something he's not entirely sure how to communicate, so unused to being the one that pursues. But I also feel justified. He already has all the things I wanted. Isn't it fair for me to have just one?

We wake up at the crack of dawn. The car is uncomfortable and freezing and we all need the bathroom. So we get another early start.

We drive through a small town and find a place to use the bathroom. Everyone we meet is shouting, gesticulating, grinning. Even though no one understands a word anyone says, Radley somehow manages to barter for some breakfast. They give us coffee and hot buttered corn tortillas, small and thick and lumpy. They're the best tortillas I've ever had in my life.

Then, around ten or eleven in the morning, we're there. According to the map, at least. The beach is still a half-mile away.

We park the car in a hilly area, in the gravelly brush. Radley removes a canvas knapsack from his duffel bag, and it shifts and clanks and clangs. We hike down the narrow dirt path that winds its way down the hill; we're sore and stiff, but too excited to complain.

The castle is almost done.

We put the finishing touches on, sculpting a few flourishes here and there, shoring up an outer wall.

Suddenly the beach spreads in front of us. There's no doubt: this is it.

There's the ocean of course; the breaking waves are foamy white, edging into liquid emerald and tea green, sinking into cobalt blue as the water stretches away. But I'm looking at the sand. The sand is golden, flecked with pink. Imagine overbaked sugar cookies, dusted with pink-colored sugar. The grains of rose shimmer in the light of the sun, a million tiny specks of quartz.

"It's real!" Audra screams.

We fall to our knees, grasping fistfuls of sand and watching the grains stream out like an hourglass, the falling pink catching the light of the sun. We roll up our pant legs and run with arms spread wide into the surf. Cloudy patches of sand swirl under the surface of the water, and the water glitters with its light. We play and splash and shout.

Then we make our way up the beach. Radley takes the tools out of his knapsack: trowels, scrapers, palette knives, small buckets. He divides them up between himself and Audra. Audra takes her tools thoughtfully, and then she leaves us, walking with a measured stride up the beach, sinking footprints into the wet sand.

Radley fills his bucket with water, mixes in some of the sand, and begins to build. The tip of his tongue pokes out the right corner of his mouth, the way it always does when he's concentrating.

"I'm going to do it now," he says.

"Do what?"

"Build the parks."

"That's what you desire most of all? Parks?"

Radley looks concerned for a moment, then shrugs. "It's the best thing I can think of. And, you know, I've been thinking about this for a while."

It's not like I have any better ideas.

"So you gotta help me build, man. You can do the flat parts. Those'll be real easy."

Radley sculpts trees with tall rounded tops, and I scrape out the spacious sheets of grass. He lovingly shapes the flower patches in tiny detail, each flower with its own fringe of petals. He builds fountains, and benches with room for two. He etches out the winding paths and lines them with neatly trimmed hedges. He gets creative with the hedges.

Suddenly I realize that it's been a while since we've seen Audra.

I leap up, accidentally kicking apart one of Radley's benches. "Hey!" he shouts, but I don't stop. I run down the beach.

Audra is sculpting, too; patting and poking and pouring, smiling as she works. It's a sand castle. It's glorious. The central fortress soars upward; the turrets are dripping masterpieces. The top of the tower reaches almost to her waist.

I sit down next to her. "Audra?"

"Yeah?"

"Are you doing what I think you're doing?"

"Maybe."

"Do you really think this will work?"

"I have to believe that it will work or else it won't work," she says. Her face is tinged with pink, and a light dusting of freckles is coming out on her arms. Her feet are bare, and she has pink sand between her toes.

"So are you saying that I'm not supposed to tell you it won't work?"

"Wouldn't you rather believe that it will?" She pulls her hair back, rubbing muddy sand through it.

I watch her build, and then I help for a while. After a bit, Radley strolls over. "When are you coming back?" he demands. "I have a lot more work to do to build all those parks for the whole world, and I like, really don't think it's fair that Audra gets all your help on just one little castle."

"I'll be right over," I say, but I don't move. My desire to be near Audra is stronger than my sense of duty. Stronger than anything else I'm feeling right now. I keep trying to figure out how I'm going to say goodbye to her. Then I have to remind myself that this is just make-believe; she's not going anywhere.

The tide is coming in, and the waves lick higher and higher up the beach. The castle is almost done. We put the finishing touches on, sculpting a few flourishes here and there, shoring up an outer wall. The water keeps coming. Audra sits back and waits, and I sit next to her. When the waves come, the water surges against my stomach, then my chest. The ocean pours in, filling the outer courtyards, streaming in through windows, tearing down doors. The outer walls begin to erode and drift away.

"In my head I'm building a bubble," Audra says.

Something hurts inside me when she says this; I want to build a bubble, too. I want her to be inside it. Nothing else. A bubble to keep us safe and warm, insulated from all the disappointments.

Audra stands up, wades into the center of the flooded castle, and starts digging with her bare hands. I stand up to help, but she waves me off. Radley walks over, stands and watches.

From the middle of the castle she pulls out a key, delicately crafted out of hammered pink shell, hanging from a frayed silver ribbon. Did the key materialize, or did she put it there when she started building? I don't know. I don't ask. She kisses the key gently and then hangs it around her neck.

She hugs Radley and whispers something in his ear. Then she puts her arms around my neck and kisses my cheek, and I just stand there, thinking, *Do something,* but I have no idea what to do.

Audra wades into the surf, farther and farther out. The waves sweep up around her and swallow her until all I can see is her head. She keeps going. And then the water finishes her, and she disappears.

For twenty-five long seconds that feel like the rest of my life I stand there, watching, waiting.

Then. Cold clarity. I run toward her, the water slashing at my thighs, the mist spraying in my face. Radley is calling my name, but I ignore him. The waves hit my chest. Radley's yelling is washed away by the spray of the sea.

I clamp my mouth shut, hold my breath, and dive underwater. And I swim. I swim, just as hard as I can. ❧

greensea

Continued from page 47

gotten to, stacked neatly in huge piles and kept dry with wrappings of oiled canvas.

There was weepwillow and timbertru and honeytree. There was yellowcore and orangebark and ashwood. And there was oakheart, hard and glossy brown. Absinthe held a plank of it proudly in his hands. Now they could repair the lady proper, though it didn't seem so important now.

Cord upon cord of wood, rarer han any gold, was transferred from the *Cloudsprit Dauntless* to the *Crimson Moon.*

"Three bells and all's well," Candlebert called out. " 'Twas cunning in good measure, that led them to the treasure."

They sailed into Cordelio as the sun dipped toward the horizon. The clouds below them grew rosy around their edges, and the ones before them, piled into mountains, were orange and blinding white.

Absinthe called for all hands. He stood before them at the railing of the quarterdeck. It was one of the hardest things he had ever done when he reached behind his neck and removed his scarf. They all could see it now. They could see what he saw in the mirror every morning, the puckered, pink scar that stretched across his neck. Some looked away, abashed, some looked curious, but most just looked, as if they had known all along. And some, like Doubloon, looked proud.

"There is no chivalry," Absinthe said to them. "There are no castles, no knights, no kings." He looked at their faces, and knew his crew, all their black hearts and white, their scurvy, honorable, roguish, honest, lying, true hearts. "There are only pyrates." He felt the smile stretch across his face. He looked at them, at each and every one. They began to smile, too. "There are only pyrates, lads, and I your captain," he cried out. "What say you?"

"Aye!" went the shout from one and all.

"What say you?"

"Aye, aye!" they said again, erupting with joy.

"What say you?!"

"Aye, aye, aye!" And all the hats, knives, chickens, kerchiefs, shirts, barrels, and swords that were thrown into the air came down to drum a merry tune upon the deck.

Absinthe noticed Three Hails Barty sitting on a stool, his head down as he sewed a pair of trousers. "And what say you, Mr. Barty?"

Barty looked up with goggling eyes. "Oh, aye, Cap'n. I heard you the first time." He winked, grinning.

The celebration began in earnest then. Slops the cook was a hell-on piper, and he laid in with a skirling reel, blowing his bag for all it was worth, his cheeks turning red as apples. The tune was joyous and bright, and Welkin the carpenter's mate stamped out an impromptu beat with his feet, assaulting his drum in time with it. Then others joined in, interweaving notes like the finest sinnets with more pipe and drum, or just beating upon the scuttlebutts or twanging shrouds and stays. The tootling, raucous tune swirled and thrummed.

Patches blew on rum bottle for bass notes, between taking swigs of its contents, and soon there was clapping and hallooing enough that not a man nor woman among them could keep still their feet. At one point the dancing got so fierce it seemed the entire ship bounced in tune—boom-da-boom-da-boom-da-boom—and it was said in latter days that even the piebald dog, Quince, leaped to his hind legs and danced a jig, and then begged for a pipe of greenweed afterward, so satisfied was he.

Absinthe walked to the railing of the quarterdeck. They sailed toward cloud turned gold and ivory, with a breeze of coconut and pepper, and a deep blue overhead that spoke of bright stars to come. He held his scarf over the side of the ship and let go. It unfurled like a flag, swimming in the air, and then collapsed, falling astern and disappearing into cloud below.

He was the luckiest man in the world. ❧

name day

Continued from page 53

The delicate threads of light I'd seen when imbibing before were now thigh-thick bolts of pure energy. Their brilliance dazzled me, and the world of matter blinked out of existence. A million clamoring voices vied for my attention. I tamped them down, not wanting to lose my incandescent anger at Lupe.

Energy shifted and changed, blasting through my body in a flood. The sick emptiness of the guardian pulsed and sent nauseous waves to the very core of my being. I could sense Lupe behind me as a tangled flux of intersecting n-dimensional shapes and I reached for him through my new awareness.

"No," my mother's voice said. "He is of no importance." She sounded far away and yet whispered directly into my ear, her voice conveyed to me through my new senses.

I stopped and listened to the ocean's voices that echoed inside me. They had quieted down and now spoke with the soothing tones I recognized from my childhood. "Mother?"

"Find the strong one." Lights flickered and danced just out of reach.

I shifted, following lines of force to Big Orca. Electric ripples flashed through his swollen biceps, pieces of the ocean from his Name Day living inside him, giving him strength. I reached and grabbed, wrapping my new powers through his body where the ocean thrived.

Big Orca shouted. A cry of alarm. I pushed and tweaked, dancing him like a marionette across the clearing. Sunflower ran after, pulling on his arm like a toddler trying to stop an ox.

"Excellent. What a good boy." My mother's voice purred with pleasure.

I slapped Big Orca's hands against the cement of the guardian pillar. I knew what the ocean wanted. I could feel it inside me, and I decided I wanted it as well.

Clarity reached for me, knocking me sideways, but it was too late. I pushed with all of Big Orca's strength. The ground groaned beneath us and, with a grinding roar, the base of the tower ripped free of the earth. Dirt and leaves sprayed toward us in a shower. I closed my eyes, not needing them anymore.

I released Big Orca, and he dropped to the new ragged edge of the cliff, sobbing like a baby. The guardian sphere plunged downward, trailing long black strands of otherworldly material. The ocean parted beneath it, and the glass shattered on the jagged rocks far below with an implosion that shook my new world.

The ocean seemed to wait, poised at the limits of the guardian essence that seeped into the mud and rock, vanishing beneath us. Flashing rivulets of goop trickled forward, filling the empty space in an ever-increasing flood.

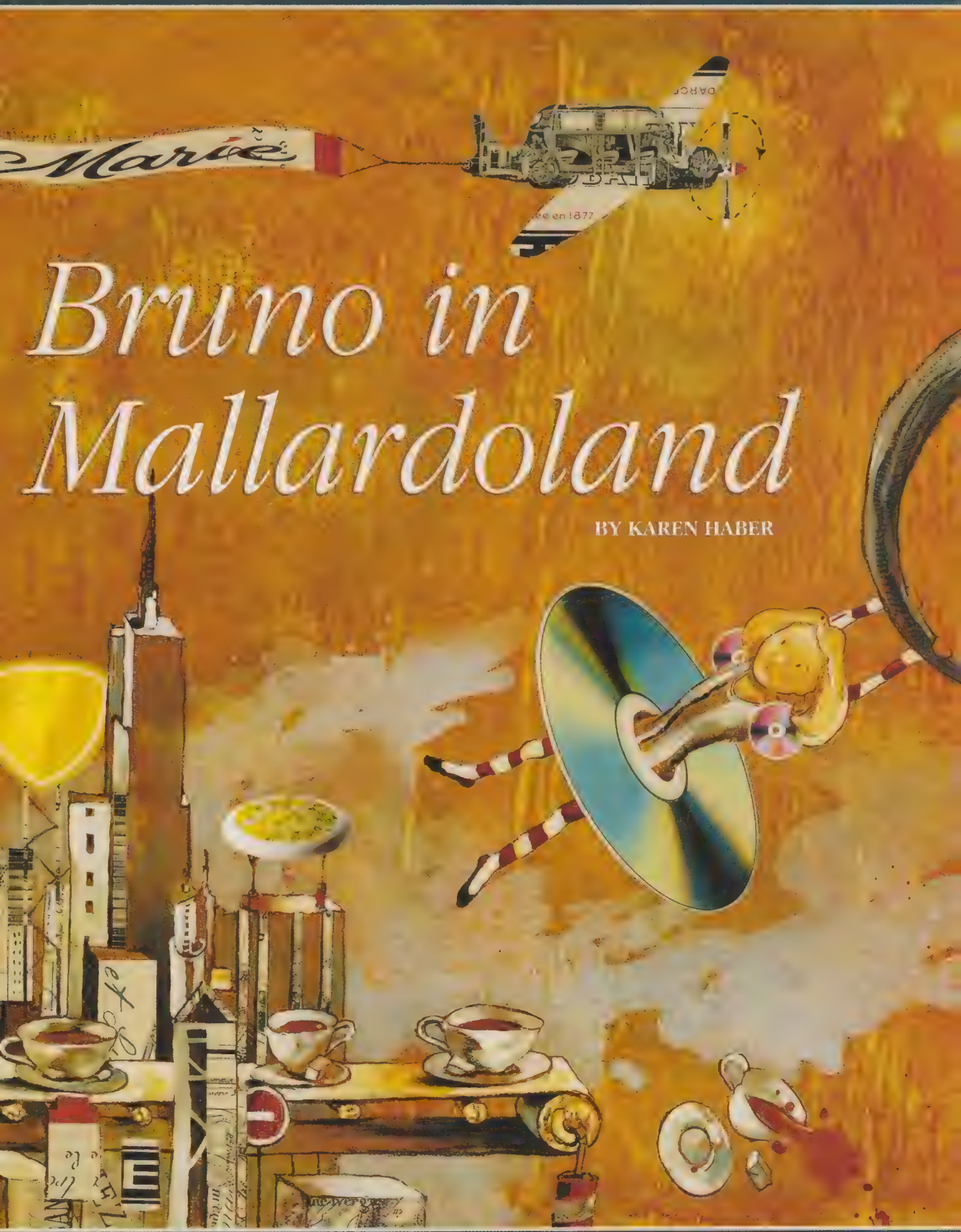
"What have you done?" Clarity's voice echoed in my brain, sounding lost and very far away though she stood right beside me on the edge.

"What I was destined for." I smiled and leaned over the cliff.

The ocean rushed upward, grabbing rocks and plants, hurling itself ever higher. A buzzing hum filled my ears, thousands or millions of voices babbling with anticipation. Big Orca shook himself and then grabbed Sunflower, turning and running inland. Lupe whimpered and crawled toward me, belly scraping the ground.

The ocean crested the top of the cliff, gathering into a shining wave as tall as the trees around us. Clarity's eyes grew even wider, and her mouth opened and closed but no sound emerged. I spread my arms wide, welcoming my full transformation. "Come."

Rainbow light leapt forward, and then the main bulk of the wave poured over the land in an irresistible tide, uprooting trees and sending them flying like toothpicks in a tornado. Clarity spun away from me, screaming as the ocean absorbed her. I, too, was swept away, surfing like a tiny cork on an endless sea. I laughed and let go, listening for mother, opening myself to what this new world would bring. ❧



Bruno in Mallardoland

BY KAREN HABER

Surprise, humor, and a sense of the absurd are the tools of Bruno Mallart's fantastic trade.

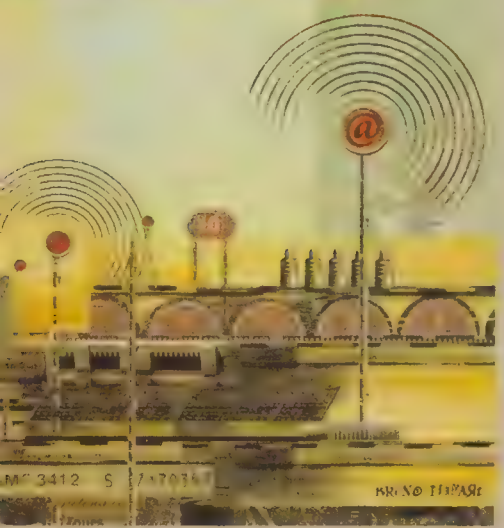
Before you go, take a look below at some of Bruno's comments in his Q & A with *Realms of Fantasy*.

Q: What makes you happy in your work?
A: I like the idea of inventing a universe according to what passes through my head. We as humans have all this imaginative and creative ability, and I have the rare chance to be able to truly apply it in my trade. It's work that calls mainly upon the imaginary. It's the most important aspect of this work, much more than the technical side. If I could imagine my images and print them directly from my brain onto the sheet without having to pass them through my hands, I would be even happier.

Q: Have you always had a good sense of the absurd? Where did you get it? (Does anyone else in your family suffer from this malady?)
A: I think that the whole world suffers from that malady, in my family and elsewhere! Isn't the world around us absurd? I'm not talking about the revolting things that take place on this planet. I mean to say that life, the mere fact that we are here, isn't this an incongruous dream? I think

that my questioning of reality dates from the moment—age 4 years, 3 months, 8 days—when I first started to think. I began to formulate my ideas on paper a bit later, at graphic art school, a very good school where attention to excellence took precedence over all other considerations. The atmosphere of permanent competition that reigned there made me feel a bit out of place. In reaction, I started to develop in my work an absurd style and slightly cynical humor. Later, while starting to work as an illustrator, I gave up this style to do more traditional work. But that began to annoy me and I returned to the first style.

Q: Your work is very playful, very surreal, very marvelous. What sort of reaction are you hoping to evoke from your viewers?
A: When creating my images, I don't think about their destination. I only try to satisfy myself. I don't think of a possible reader/spectator, but of what I would like to see. Above all I must surprise and amuse myself. I suppose that by consequence the public will have the same reaction.



Q: How important is humor—and surprise—in your work?
A: As I just mentioned, these qualities are the engines of my images. But under the humor something more serious always hides. I don't always know what it is. All that I know is behind any form of humor, there is a questioning.

Q: There is often a great deal of movement—fascinating rhythm—in your illustrations. Do you consciously seek to portray kinetic elements in your work?
A: Indeed, in my work, one regularly finds wheels and other rolling, moving objects. I don't know why I can't stop! It's true that I'm very attracted by all that is mechanical, while being a poor mechanic! One aspect of movement I find very beautiful, as in the movie *Modern Times* with Charlie Chaplin. But I also like the dirty, greasy, rusted side of an old machine, so my images also point out this aspect of mechanics.

Q: What challenges did you face when illustrating the famous fantasy tale *Alice in Wonderland*?
A: This project had a very precise goal. It was a commissioned project for a design agency that was celebrating its 20th anniversary and wanted to publish an original book for the occasion. One can notice, while looking closely, that there are all kinds of contemporary products inserted in the images. In fact the products were designed and drawn by this agency. My challenge was to find a fresh, original approach to illustrate this tale dating from the 19th century, and also to find the ways that would allow me to insert objects into the images, such as boxes of medication, toothpaste tubes, or biscuit snacks!

Q: What inspired you? And had you always wanted to illustrate *Alice*?
A: It's true that this tale is one that has inspired many illustrators. I reread *Alice* with special attention to its world of wonders. The savor of this tale lies in the dream and the absurdity, but especially in the humor of the English word games. Obviously one cannot translate this aspect into images. However, I think that my graphic universe has a direct relationship with this particular form of narration. I could play with the author's themes and substitute certain forms for others to create surprises.

Q: Did you intend to make it visually contemporary (i.e., by using a compact disc for Alice's skirt, and to have the Cheshire Cat brushing his famous smile with toothpaste...) or were you just looking for unusual ways to portray the characters?

A: Due to the nature of the commission, it was obvious and necessary to place Alice in a modern universe. However, like always in my work, there are elements of the past which surface. The rapport between the past and the present is what provides an unusual flavor to the work.

Q: Are there any other famous fantasy or fairy tales that you would like to illustrate?

A: I have a project to illustrate the *Three Little Pigs*. It will be called *The Three Big Pigs*, and will place this morality tale off-balance, making a delirious parody of it.

Q: Do you actively look for "found" objects to use in your collages?
A: I am always interested in discovering strange new objects which could be useful to me in my collages. My friends know it and often become my emissaries when they visit flea markets and refuse sites. One of their latest lucky finds: a box of splendid old gilded buttons that will surely become the eyes of a hypothetical rhinoceros with pistons…

Q: Do you scan the actual objects (compact discs, Chesterfield cigarette packs, etc.) for use in your illustrations or do you paint them?
A: These objects are obviously scanned. The power of my creations precisely resides in the real elements of the collages, which amplify the composition. If I were to draw them myself, it would take too much time and the drawing would lose its savor.

Q: How often does a found object provide a major stroke of inspiration?
A: In general, I don't rely on one object to imagine a new drawing. Each time I find an object, say, an old document, I scan it in very high definition. Once I scan an object, it joins the thousands of others that I have saved on my hard drive. This allows me to use all of them for new creations.

My work doesn't use perspective like photography and therefore often features two-dimensional forms similar to ancient Egyptian art.

Q: Do you ever build your object/collages in three dimensions?
A: At one time, I painted pictures in open boxes. I like the idea of an image divided into several boxes—it gives the impression of telling a story as in a cartoon. But now I use the computer, with which I amuse myself thanks to its impressive graphics possibilities. I would very much like to move on to the third dimension and to create sculptures in the style of my drawings. I've already put together a few not-too-bad objects along those lines.

Q: Have you ever made toys?
A: No, never. Well, maybe once, when I was a teenager. My parents gave me a model of a wooden fishing vessel. It was very beautiful with its bent hull made of finely formed wooden rods. But once finished, I found it missed something. I added wheels to it and surmounted it with a delirious structure that made one think of an oil refinery! It became a sophisticated toy, useful for nothing and totally absurd, which cost me hundreds of hours of work.

Q: Which are your favorite images from your oeuvre?
A: One of my preferred images represents a

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By Eric T. Baker

The lid comes off the sandbox with *Fable 2* for the Xbox 360.

FABLE 2 **IS A SANDBOX COMPUTER ROLEPLAYING GAME FOR THE** Xbox 360 from Lionhead Studios and Microsoft. The game is a sequel to 2004's *Fable* in that it takes place in the same fictional world of Albion and the player takes the role of a descendant of the hero of the first game. *Fable 2* is, however, set 500 years after the events of *Fable*. *Fable 2* begins with the player choosing the sex of the character he will control, and then goes to a tutorial level where the character is still a child. The tutorial level is pretty linear, but at its close, the character fast forwards to young adulthood, the game world opens up, and the lid is off the sandbox.

The difference between a linear game and a sandbox game is that in the first, there is nothing to do but advance the story. Sandbox games have no "rails." They let players pass the time in exploration or minigames or loot gathering. There are "side" quests that earn the character experience and items without affecting the outcome of the game. *Fable 2* has all these things. The game's big bad will hang fire indefinitely, patiently delaying his evil plot until the player is done exploring and/or kitting out a nice home and/or getting married and starting a family. Or two.

The main story of *Fable 2* is a revenge tale of the player's character gathering a party of heroes to confront an evil lord. It takes only about 10 hours to play out the events of this story, but the actual time a player will spend with the game is likely to be three or four times that long. Besides the "normal" side quests (kill the bandits in the camp, etc.), there are three scavenger hunt quests that give the player reason to poke into every corner of the game map. One is the silver keys, which unlock special chests. The second is hunting for the foul-mouthed gargoyles; for every 10 destroyed, a special chest of booty is unlocked in a secret dungeon.

The third quest stars the most interesting nonplayer character (NPC) in the game, the character's loyal dog. The character finds the dog in childhood and keeps him for the rest of the game. The dog can be trained by reading various in- game books so that he basically levels along with the character. He can warn of impending danger, help the character fight, join them in interacting with other NPCs, and chase a rubber ball the character can throw, but his most important role is sniffing out treasure, particularly buried chests. The dog is helpful, unique, and almost always with the character.

The player's character in *Fable 2* has no voice. Instead he interacts with the world's NPCs by doing "expressions" like dancing or heroic pose or obscene gesture. There are over 50 of these; some NPCs like some, some like others. The player can check the NPCs' information for what they like and then do that to raise their opinion of the character. High opinion leads to discounts on goods, outright gifts, and (if the NPC's sexual orientation is appropriate) requests for marriage. The character can marry as many times as the player wants him or her to, but each spouse will need a home, an allowance and attention (sex, gifts, outings). If the player chooses to have children, the children will also want attention. Ignoring these demands

There are so many great side quests and treasure hunts in Fable 2 *that you might forget that there is an evil mad man out there that has to be dealt with.*

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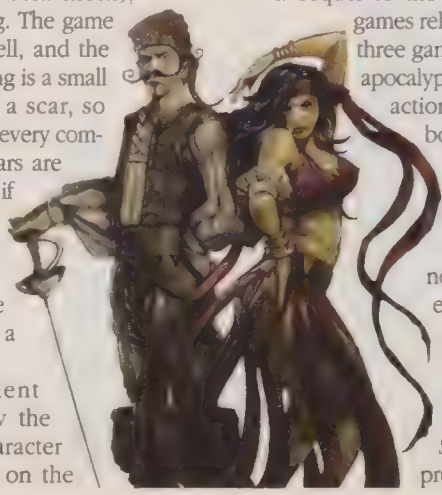
choices the player makes. Broadly, the player can choose to be good or evil. The choices don't affect the broad strokes of the story, but they make the specifics very different. For instance, good characters can donate money to the Temple of Light in exchange for experience. Evil characters can bring humans for sacrifice to the Temple of Dark to earn special gear. They get a particular bonus if the human is one of their spouses.

Overall, *Fable 2* is a grand AAA title that both looks and plays great with very few glitches or frustrations. In totality, its only weakness is also its strength: there is so much to do and see that the actual story of the game gets lost. When the character is busy working to buy off

for too long can lead to divorce.

In addition to treasure hunting, starting families, and throwing the ball for the dog, the character can take day jobs like blacksmith and bartender. The money from treasure hunting and working can then be funneled into buying homes and businesses in the various villages. Renting these properties earns the character even more money to buy gear, keep the families comfortable, and buy more property. And when the player gets tired of doing these things, he can do another part of the main quest and move the game's actual story along another chapter.

Both the main quest and side quests are moved along by combat. The good news is that combat is very forgiving. One button is for melee attacks (swords, etc.), one for ranged weapons (crossbows and guns), one for magic (bolts and area effects), and one for dodging. The game auto aims pretty well, and the only penalty for dying is a small experience loss and a scar, so the player will win every combat eventually. Scars are permanent, so only if the player wants to keep the character pretty is there a reason to reload if the character "dies" in a fight.



The final element of *Fable 2* is how the world and the character change depending on the

the tavern where he is bartending so he can raise the price of drinks to make more money to buy better furniture to keep the wife and children happy, it is easy to forget that there is still an evil mad man out there plotting the end of the world.

The cost to create a AAA computer RPG being what it is, months can pass between releases. So it is fortunate that this year two are out. In addition to Lion Head's *Fable 2*, Bethesda Softworks has released ***Fallout 3*** for the PC, Xbox 360, and PS3. This game is a sequel to the classic Black Isle Studio games released in 1997 and 1998. All three games are set in a postnuclear apocalypse America, but in *FO3*, the action takes place around a bombed-out Washington, D.C. instead of on the West Coast as the first two did.

American RPGs with a nonfantasy setting are rare enough, but to have one produced this well on this large a budget is even rarer. In fact, Bethesda's previous games were all in the *Elder Scroll* series which has a pretty traditional fantasy set-

ting. *FO3* proves that Bethesda's designers can create a great game regardless of the setting, which is good news for players who are tired of swinging swords at dragons. *FO3* lets players swing sledge hammers at super mutants. But it is safer to use a rocket launcher. If the character can find one.

Like *Fable 2*, *FO3* lacks "rails." The player takes the role of an adolescent who has grown up in a Vault, one of a series of underground bomb shelters where some of humanity has hidden out from the nuclear devastation above. This game starts with the character picking sex, race, and eventual looks during a birth scene. The player picks the character's primary statistics during a toddler sequence, is given an intro to the combat, quest, and inventory systems

during a tween sequence, and picks the character's starting skills during an adolescent scene. After that the game finally begins in earnest with the character breaking out of the Vault and into the Washington Wastelands.

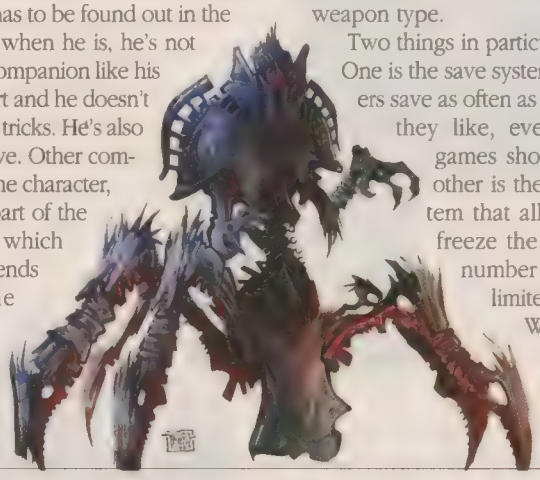
The main story of the game is to find the character's father, who it quickly turns out has not been very truthful about his background. As with *Fable 2*, however, there is no push to

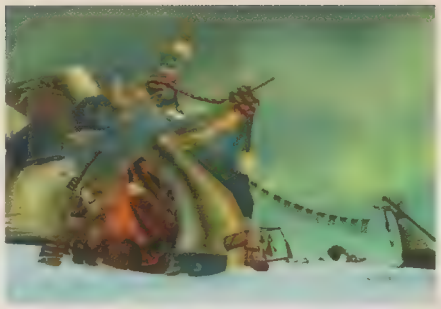
follow the main story. Side quests abound, or the player can just set off in any direction and quickly discover conflict. There are settlements, loners, caravans, radioactive mutant creatures, robots, children, old people, men, women, and combinations of all of those. Some of them want the character dead, some of them want to do business, many have quests to hand out or resolve, and some just want to be left alone.

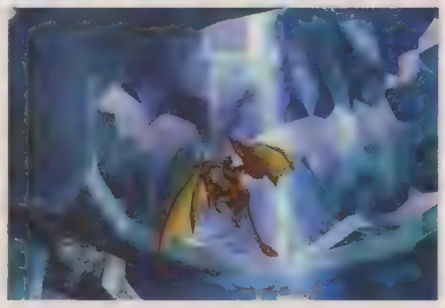
There is a dog, and the dog will join with the character, but he has to be found out in the wastes, and even when he is, he's not the ever-present companion like his *Fable 2* counterpart and he doesn't do nearly as many tricks. He's also harder to keep alive. Other companions will join the character, but they are not part of the main quest, and which ones will join depends on whether the character is walking a good, neutral, or evil path. For instance, evil characters can buy a chick-fighting slave at the slaver's town. Good characters can rescue a nonferal supermutant from a Vault.

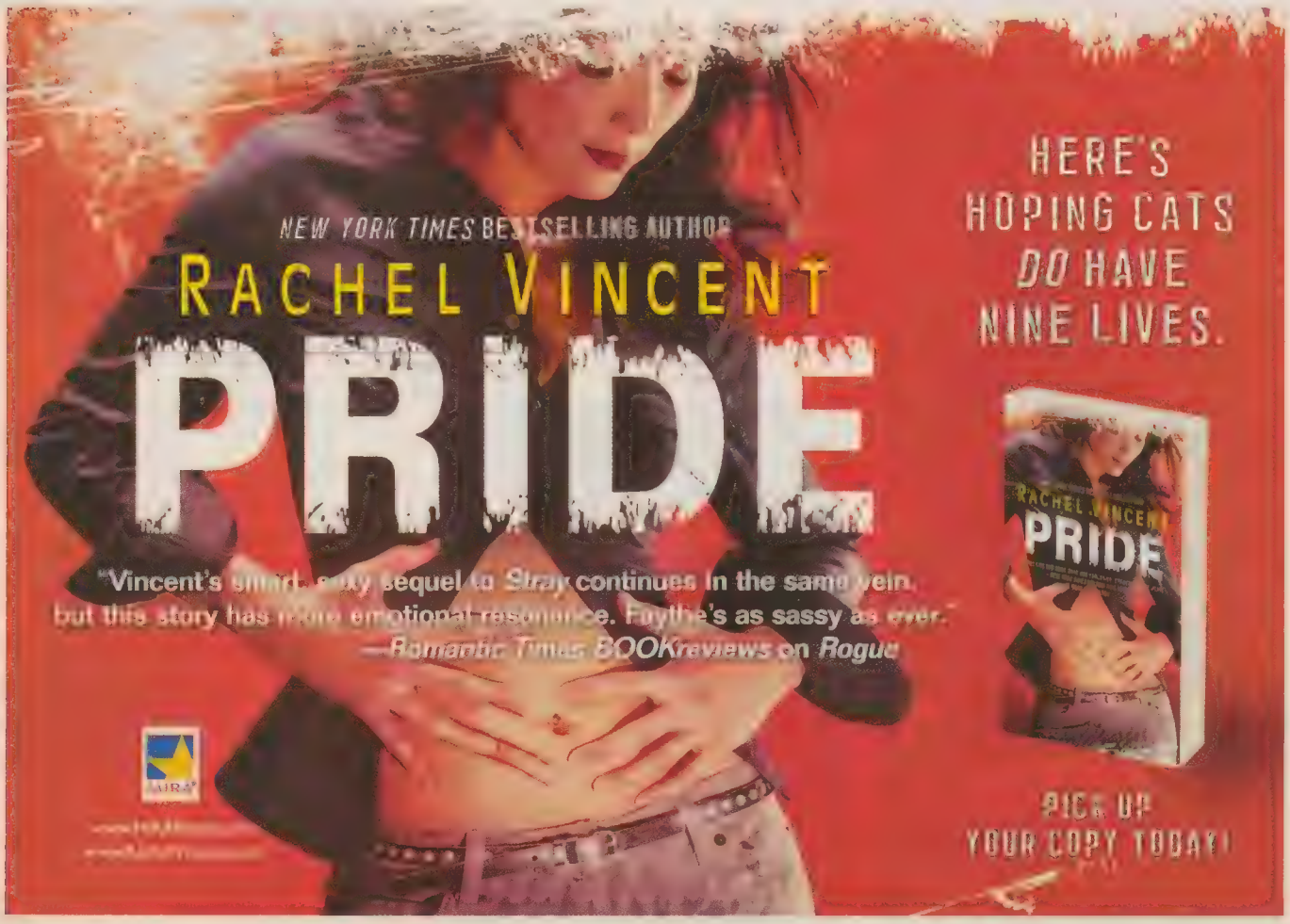
Skills in the game include barter, lock picking, stealth, electronics, medicine, speech, explosives, and four different weapons skills, from melee to energy weapons. It is impossible for the character to be good at all of them. There are only 20 levels in game and the character only gets 15 points for skills and a perk with each level. Luckily, experience is earned for picking locks and hacking computers as well as for killing things, so thief characters have a chance, but surviving in the wastes involves killing things; the character is going to have to be great with at least one weapon type.

Two things in particular make *FO3* fun. One is the save system that lets the players save as often as they like, wherever they like, even in combat. All games should have this. The other is the VATS combat system that allows the player to freeze the action and plot a number of shots or blows limited by action points. When the player then hits execute, the game shows a bullet time-ish video of the





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resulting attacks, including gory dismemberments on critical hits. *Fallout 3* may not be the best game of the year, but you wouldn't want to try to live on the difference between it and whatever is.

The rails are back for the next game. ***Golden Axe: Beast Rider*** for the PS3 from Secret Level and Sega is an action game where the player takes the role of an Amazon-like warrior who must fight her way across a fantasy landscape and battle various menaces and bosses before finally confronting and defeating the big bad. This is also a remake of a classic game, but it is a less successful one since it doesn't include the multiplayer play that was the heart of the 1989 arcade title that started the series.

The main innovation in game-play for this version of the game is the color system for enemy attacks. The attacker will glow blue or orange depending on whether the player should block or evade the attack. The problem with this system is that the player can't just move the character out of the way as they would in a normal game. The player must hit the right button or be struck. And he must hit the right button at the right time or be struck. Overall, instead of making combat easier, the system makes the game harder to play, and that isn't a good thing when the whole basis of the game is fighting.

To finish out, the biggest MMO and one of the biggest MMOs both have big expansions on the shelves now. *World of Warcraft* for the PC from Blizzard Entertainment has finally released its second expansion, ***The Wrath of the Lich King***. This expansion adds another continent to the *WoW* map that contains ten new zones, including a purely PvP zone that will be that way even on non-PvP servers. The expansion also includes a new "hero class" called the Death Knight. These characters are available to both the Horde and the Alliance and begin at Level 55 instead of Level 1. Players must already have a character at level 55 or above to start a Death Knight.

The other expansion is for *Lord of the Rings Online* for the PC from Turbine Inc. This expansion is the ***Mines of Moria***, and it adds not only the famous mines, but also two other regions, two new player classes, a "Legendary" item system, and, perhaps best of all, six new chapters in the "story" of the game. As much fun as exploring and leveling is in *LotRO*, what makes it unique is story quests that let the players interact with characters pulled from Tolkien's mythology. *Moria* gives the players more chances to do this.❧

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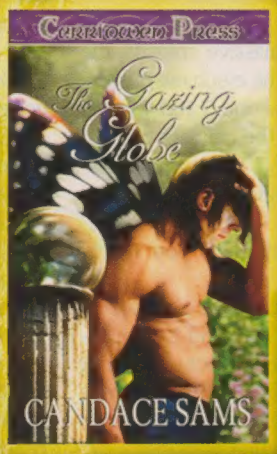

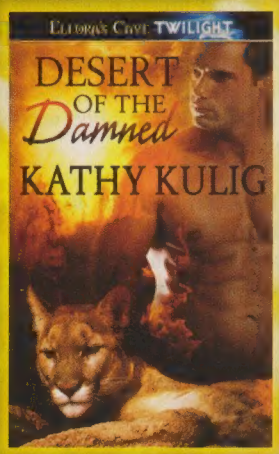

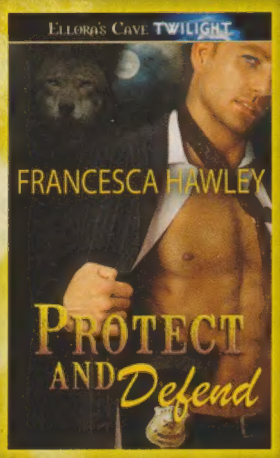

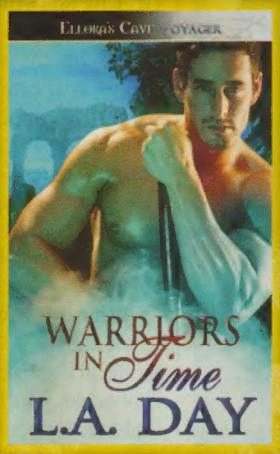

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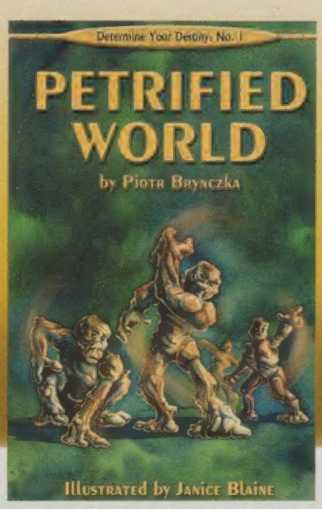

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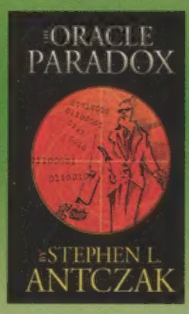

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EDGE

mallart

Continued from page 67

dog—that also looks a bit like a cow—with the head of typewriter. I made it for the cover of a novel by Kate Atkinson, but it was rejected. Their loss!

Q: What do you enjoy more, illustrating books for children or adults, and why?
A: I largely prefer to illustrate for adults. When I work for children, I must self-censor.

Q: Do you have favorite colors? What are they?
A: I like all the colors even those that seem ugliest. There are no ugly colors, there are only badly selected color relationships. I have that problem with green: I like it but I don't know how to use it well.

Q:Which artists inspire you?
A: I am absolutely a fan of work of certain famed illustrators: Saul Steinberg, Ralph Steadman, Tulio Pericoli.

Q: Which animals?
A: I love the round or massive animals, the tortoise, the rhinoceros, the elephant, the pig. In any case, when I draw one, I add wheels, and a head which is not the animal's original head. Don't ask me why, I don't know anything, but I can't stop myself.

Q: Do you listen to music as you work, and if so, to what?
A: Yes, I listen to music, songs with text. I like those that speak to me. And I often listen to the radio, where people not only speak but, if possible, say intelligent things. Here is another of the good sides of my trade: to be able to listen to stories while working.

Q: How has your training in architecture influenced your work?
A: It gives me a good base from which to define space, and movement within that space. This applies well to drawing. On the other hand, I don't believe that this foundation influenced my style directly. I even believe that the opposite could be true: if I had been an architect, I would have been completely influenced by my graphic designs.

Q: Why does fantasy appeal to children of all ages?
A: We all like to be told stories, eccentric ones, if possible, which leave the ordinary behind. Children especially enjoy this, and know the difference between reality and imagination, but can easily combine them. There must be a kind of intellectual pleasure to it.

Q: Do you have a definition of fantastic and surreal?
A: For me, there is a difference between the fantastic and the surreal. I see the fantastic as an invented parallel world, but one that functions in the same way as the real world. It may be populated by imaginary and odd magic creatures, but its universe has a logic similar to that of our reality.

The surreal one calls upon another state of consciousness, where logic disappears in order to relate this realm to dreams and the unconscious. For example, I see *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien as fantastic and *The Voyage of Shihiro* by Miyazaki as a surreal story.

Q: Does fantastic art transcend cultural differences or is it culture-specific?
A: Fantastic art, in the same way as any other type of fiction, is always based upon a specific culture. It often calls upon mythology and because of this it has a specific cultural root and flavor. Modern fantasy tales are often rooted in medieval England and the Arthurian legends, for example, just as Persian Arab culture is the root of *Tales from the Arabian Nights*.

Q: If you could be any age, what would it be?
A: As young as possible!!

Q: Do you prefer painting to using the computer, or vice versa?
A: At the moment I clearly use the computer more. But I really don't use it to draw, I achieve infinitely richer, deeper results in traditional drawing or painting. My use of the computer I think of more like being in the kitchen: after scanning, I must mix diverse ingredients, which I transform, deform, cut ... There are thousands of possibilities.

Q: What challenges do you face creating illustrations for international English-reading audiences?
A: I am of French culture, but I'm often told that my style would function better in the English-speaking countries! I don't know if it's true. I find that the trade of illustrator here or in the United States is exactly the same one. People function in the same way—it's surely a globalized culture!

Q: Do you have any advice for young aspiring artists?
A: Make what you like in the way that you like it, immediately. I wasted much time at the beginning making drawings that I did not like, because I thought that what I liked to make was not commercial enough. I was mistaken, obviously.

Q: Do you recommend that they visit "Mallardoland?" (Your website ...)
A: Absolutely!
http://www.brunomallart.com
I've just updated it with a new heading: Mallardostore. It's a little bit like the Apple Store, but more amusing:
www.mallardostore.com ❧

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